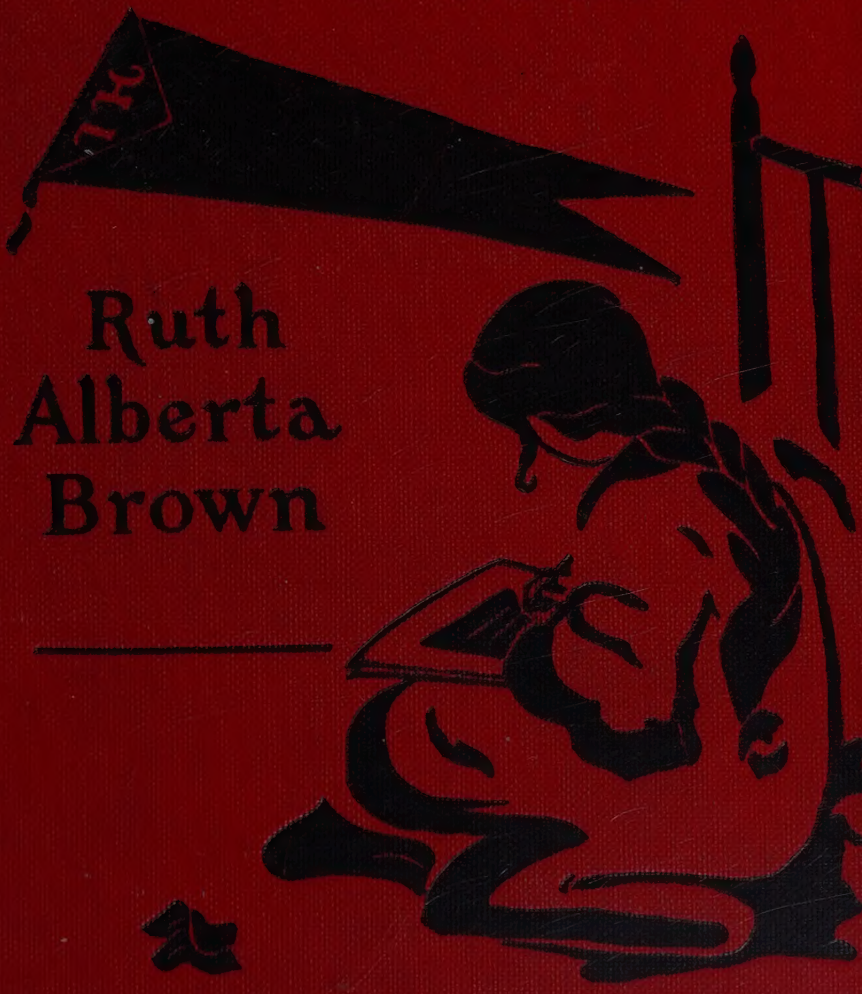
Tabitha's Vacation



Ruth Alberta Brown

IVY · HALL · SERIES

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Tabitha's Vacation

"I hope," panted Tabitha, trotting along at the rear of the procession, "that you don't have your fun in such a hurry."

TABITHA'S VACATION

VOLUME III

IN THE IVY HALL SERIES

BY

RUTH ALBERTA BROWN

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TABITHA'S VACATION

CHAPTER I

THE MCKITTRICKS' MISFORTUNE

"'Ho, ho, vacation days are here,
We welcome them with right good cheer;
In wisdom's halls we love to be,
But yet 'tis pleasant to be free,'"

warbled Tabitha Catt, pausing on the doorstep of her little desert home as she vigorously shook a dingy dusting cloth, and hungrily sniffed the fresh, sweet morning air, for, although the first week of June was already gone, the fierce heat of the summer had not yet descended upon Silver Bow, nestling in its cup-like hollow among the Nevada mountains.

"'Ho, ho, the hours will quickly fly,
And soon vacation time be by;
Ah, then we'll all in glad refrain,
Sing welcome to our school again,'"

piped up a sweet voice in muffled accents from the depths of the closet where the singer was rummaging to find hooks for her wardrobe, which lay scattered rather promiscuously about Tabitha's tiny bedroom.

"Why, Gloriana Holliday, where did you learn that?" demanded the girl on the threshold, abruptly ceasing her song. "It's as old as the hills. Mrs. Carson used to sing it when she went to school."

"So did my mother. I've got her old music book with the words in it," responded her companion, emerging from the dark closet, flushed but triumphant. "There! I've hung up the last dud I could find room for. The rest must go back in the trunk, I guess. My, but it does seem nice to have a few weeks of vacation, doesn't it?"

"One wouldn't think so to hear you carolling about school's beginning again," laughed Tabitha, shaking her finger reprovingly at the red-haired girl now busily collecting the remainder of her scattered property and bundling it into a half-empty trunk just outside the kitchen door.

Gloriana echoed the laugh, and then an-

swered seriously, "But really, I have never been glad before to see vacation come. It always meant only hard work and worry, gathering fruit in the hot sun or digging vegetables and peddling them around from door to door; while school meant books and lessons and a chance to rest a bit, and the last two years it meant Miss Angus, who did not mind my red hair and crutches."

"But it is all different now," Tabitha interrupted hastily, shuddering at the gloomy picture her companion's words had called up. "You are my sister now, and there won't be any more goats and gardens to bother about. You have left off using one crutch altogether, and don't need the other except out of doors. We are going to have a lovely vacation, and you won't want school to begin at all in September."

"Yes, it is all different now, Kitty Catt, thanks to dear old you!" agreed the younger girl, giving the slender figure in the doorway an affectionate hug. "And I suppose I shall be as daffy about this queer desert place as you are by the time Ivy Hall opens its doors again——"

"Aha!" triumphed Tabitha. "Then you don't like it now, do you? I never could get you to admit it last winter."

"I haven't admitted it yet," Gloriana retorted spiritedly. "It looks so much different in the summer time, but still seems queer to me with its heaps of rocks and no trees except the stiff old Joshuas. I wonder why they are called that. Even they don't seem like trees to me. They look like giant cactus plants, and just as cruel."

"They have beautiful blossoms," Tabitha interrupted. "We are a little too late to see them, though many of the other desert flowers are still in bloom. Look across that stretch beyond the river road. Isn't it pretty with its red and yellow carpet? May is the month to see the desert in its glory, though. *Then* it is truly beautiful. *No* one could think it ugly. But come, let's run over to Mercy's house. We have swept and dusted, and you have finished unpacking. This is our second day at home and I haven't been near to inquire how Mr. McKittrick is. He was hurt before Christmas, so we never went there during the holidays, you remember."

"Where do they live?"

"Why, I showed you the place—that queer brown house perched up——"

"Oh, yes, on that great shelf of rock, overlooking the railway station."

"The first house we see on our way up here from the depot. Mr. McKittrick always called it the Eagles' Nest, and his children the eaglets."

"What a pretty idea! How many eaglets are there besides Mercedes and the little boy you named?"

"Four other girls. Mercy is the oldest of the family. Then come Susanne, or Susie, as they call her; the twins, Inez and Irene; Rosslyn and the baby, Janie."

"That's quite a family. What nice times they must have together!" sighed Gloriana wistfully, thinking of her own orphaned life with no brothers or sisters with whom to make merry.

"Yes, I reckon they are a pretty lively bunch sometimes, for Susie is as wild as Mercedes is quiet; and Inez should have been her twin instead of Irene's. Janie is a regular little mischief, too, but such a darling! You

are sure to love her, though Rosslyn is *my* favorite. Put on your hat and let's go down before dinner. Daddy won't be home until evening, and there is nothing to keep us here."

Seizing her sunbonnet from its peg by the door, Tabitha started up the path toward town with Gloriana hobbling along at her side, when they saw Mercedes, with roguish Janie and chubby Rosslyn in tow, coming down the slope toward them. Her round, serious eyes looked heavy and worried, her childish face pale and frightened; but at sight of the two approaching figures, a smile of relief suddenly curved the drooping lips, and she exclaimed eagerly, "Oh, girls, I was just going for you! Are you on the way to our house? Oh, please say yes! Something dreadful has happened, I'm sure, for mamma has sent us all out-doors, and is in the kitchen crying fit to kill. She won't say what's the matter, and I'm horribly scared. I never saw her cry before."

Tabitha's face paled instantly. "I wonder—" she began, then stopped. How could she put her thought into words when Mercedes

was already so dreadfully frightened? "Has the doctor been to see your father this morning?" she asked.

"Yes. He stayed ever so long and talked to mamma in the kitchen. I am afraid papa is worse, for 'twas right after the doctor was gone that she began to cry so hard."

Tabitha turned to Gloriana. "I'll run on ahead," she said, "if you don't mind. You can follow more slowly with Mercedes. I—perhaps it would be better if I saw Mrs. McKittrick alone first."

"All right," agreed Glory, who, like Tabitha, was wondering if the message the doctor had delivered in the Eagles' Nest that morning had left the little mother without a ray of hope; and so she fell in step beside the anxious Mercedes, and began to chat in spritely, diverting tones while Tabitha sped swiftly up the narrow, winding path to the lonely-looking, little, brown house perched on the steep mountainside.

Arriving at the door breathless and panting, she hesitated a moment before knocking, suddenly aware that she had not the slightest idea of what she intended to say or do. A

glimpse through the screen of a huddled figure bowed despairingly over the kitchen table drove every other thought from her mind, however, and flinging open the door, she ran lightly across the room and impulsively laid her hand upon the quivering shoulders.

"Mercedes, must I tell you again—" began the muffled voice of the distracted woman, as she impatiently shook off the hand resting on her arm.

"It isn't Mercedes," Tabitha interrupted. "It is I—Tabitha. I don't know what is the matter, but if you will tell me, perhaps I can be of some use, even if I am only a girl."

Mrs. McKittrick lifted a red, swollen face from her arms outstretched on the table, glanced in surprise at the black-eyed girl bending so sympathetically above her, and once more burst into a flood of tears, sobbing wildly, "It ain't any use, Tabitha! You couldn't help if you was a woman grown. No one can help. The doctor says—" The choking words died on her lips. She could not bear to repeat the doctor's verdict.

"That Mr. McKittrick is worse?" whispered Tabitha.

The bowed head nodded despairingly.

"Surely he isn't going to——"

"Die?" cried the woman wildly. "Yes, he must die unless we can get him out of here. The only hope is an operation. That means Los Angeles, a hospital, a nurse, and hundreds of dollars; and not a cent coming in from anywhere. The children are too young to earn, and I can't work with him to nurse and six youngsters to care for. Oh, it does seem as if troubles never come singly! Whatever we are going to do is more than I know. The whole world has turned upside down!"

Gravely Tabitha nodded her head. Only a year before as she had stood beside the bed of her father, fighting what seemed like a hopeless battle with death, she, too, had felt that despairing helplessness. "If only Dr. Vane were here!" she whispered fervently.

"I don't believe he could do a bit more for the man than Dr. Hayes is doing. He'd just say the same thing, and there wouldn't be any more money than there is now to carry out his orders."

In vain Tabitha sought to comfort and cheer the despondent soul, but seemed only to

make matters worse, and at length, disheartened at her apparent failure, she stole away from the brown house on the bluff, and with Gloriana following silently at her heels, set out for home. Not a word passed between them as they hastened down the main street of the town, until, just as they reached the dingy telegraph station, the sound of the busy, clattering key caused Tabitha to halt abruptly and a gleam of determination to flash over her sober, worried face.

"That's what!" she exclaimed joyfully. "I'll do it! Mr. Carson will fix everything. 'Twas in his mine that McKittrick was hurt."

"What do you mean? Where are you going?" asked bewildered Gloriana, unable to follow Tabitha's thoughts, and wondering what errand was taking her into the low, dimly lighted shack from which issued the monotonous, nervous, clicking sound which had attracted Tabitha's attention.

"To telegraph Mr. Carson. If he knew how badly off Mr. McKittrick is, he would send him inside in a minute."

"Inside?"

"To Los Angeles, I mean. People here

on the desert call that 'inside,' though I never could see why. Please, Mr. Goodwin, give me a blank. I want to send a telegram."

The man behind the counter supplied her with the necessary materials, and stood waiting curiously for the message to be written. But another idea had occurred to Tabitha, and turning away from the operator with the blank in her hand, she whispered to Gloriana in dismay, "I don't dare telegraph. Mr. Goodwin is a worse gossip than any old maid I ever knew, and he'd tell it all over town before noon!"

"Then write a letter."

"It takes nearly a week for mail to travel that far. It might be too late by—I've got it! How will this do?"

Rapidly she scribbled a few hasty words on the slip in her hands and passed it to Gloriana, who read in amazement this queer scrawl:

"Wire five hundred silver headed eagles. Must get rich quick. Ask Carrie to translate. Letter follows.

Tabitha Catt."

"That is more than ten words, but I can't

help it. I'm willing to pay for it if it does the work."

"But, Kitty, what does it mean?" asked mystified Gloriana, privately thinking it the silliest piece of nonsense she had ever heard of. "Will he know what you want?"

"Carrie will. We used to write notes to each other in cipher when we were little. *We* called it cipher. Of course it was all utter nonsense, but I am sure she will remember."

"It doesn't sound—sensible—to me," Gloriana confessed. "I suppose five hundred silver headed eagles means five hundred dollars, but what is that about getting rich?"

Tabitha laughed gleefully. "Rosslyn McKittrick was a long time learning to say his own name when he was a baby," she explained. "As near as he could get it, 'twas 'Russ Getrich.' Mr. Carson was superintendent of the Silver Legion then, instead of one of the owners, and as Mr. McKittrick was working there when Rosslyn was born, the miners made him their mascot, and Mr. Carson used to tease him by calling him 'Must get rich quick.' I couldn't write 'McKittrick' in the telegram without Goodwin suspecting what I am up to;

so I did the next best thing I could think of."

"But—" It all still seemed so ridiculous to the red-haired girl.

"You think he will wonder if I am crazy?" Tabitha had read the look of doubt in her companion's face, and correctly surmised what she was thinking. "Perhaps he will, but I don't believe so. He is quick to understand things. Now we will skip back to the post-office and I'll scratch him a letter of explanation, so it will go out with to-day's mail. Then if he shouldn't translate the telegram correctly—well, the letter will get there as soon as possible afterward."

As she spoke, she delivered the written message to the waiting operator, smiled with satisfaction at his look of baffled curiosity and bewilderment, and assuring him that it was worded exactly as she wanted it sent, she left the dingy office confident that the queer cipher would bring the desired results. Nor was she mistaken.

Early the next morning Mercedes came flying excitedly down the path to the Catt cottage, and, without the formality of knocking,

burst into the kitchen where the two girls were busy washing up the breakfast dishes.

"Oh, Kitty! Gloriana!" she cried, half laughing, half sobbing with sheer delight. "Guess what's happened! Mr. Carson has sent mamma some money to take papa to Los Angeles. Now he can get well. That is what has been worrying her so much. The doctor said he would die unless he was operated on, and mamma hadn't the money to get it done. They are to start to-morrow. Mamma's going, too. Doctor says every minute counts, and he has telegraphed to the hospital to make arrangements already."

She paused, all out of breath, to mop her steaming forehead; and Tabitha, studying the flushed, shining face, wondered that she had ever thought Mercedes McKittrick dull and homely.

"Isn't that fine?" she heard Gloriana saying, as heartily as if she had not known anything about the telegram before. "What are the rest of you going to do while your mother is away? You children, I mean."

"That's how I happened to come here," Mercedes replied, her eyes losing some of their

glow as she recalled her errand in that part of the town. "Mamma sent me down to Miss Davis' house with a note, but she isn't there; and the woman next door says she has gone to Riverside for two weeks. I s'pose we'll have to find someone else instead. But I was so near I couldn't help running on down to tell the news. I must be going now. There is lots to be done before train time to-morrow, and mamma'll need me."

"We will come up and help her pack as soon as we get the house righted," Tabitha found tongue to say. "She mustn't get too tired before she starts."

So Mercedes raced away again, and a few moments later the two busy little housekeepers in the hollow locked up their orderly cottage and followed more slowly up to the Eagles' Nest on the bluff.

"Where can the children be?" Tabitha's expectant eyes searched in vain for a glimpse of the noisy, lively brood of 'eaglets,' who usually saw her coming a long way off, and met her half-way down the mountainside with a boisterous shout of welcome. To-day, however, not one of the sextette was in sight about

the queer little brown house, and the whole place wore a deserted air.

"Maybe they have gone visiting so Mrs. McKittrick can look after her packing unmolested," suggested Gloriana, letting her keen gray eyes sweep the steep, rocky incline for some sign of the youthful McKittricks, but with no better result.

"That must be it," concluded Tabitha, "though I should have thought—why, Mercedes, Susie! What *is* the matter?"

Coming suddenly around the corner of a huge boulder where the children often played house, the two girls almost tumbled over a row of the most woe-begone, utterly miserable looking figures they had ever seen,—Mercedes, Susie, Inez, Irene, Rosslyn and Janie, all seated on a broad, flat rock as stiff as marble statues, and with faces almost as stony and staring.

"Why, children!" echoed Gloriana, equally amazed. "What are you doing here? What has happened?"

"Mamma is crying again," whispered Mercedes, dabbing savagely at a tear which

suddenly brimmed over and splashed down the end of her nose.

"She says she won't go and leave us alone with Mercy," gulped Susanne, striving hard to keep the telltale quiver out of her voice.

"And there ain't money enough to go and take us all," supplemented Inez, who had earned the title of "Susie's shadow," because she preferred the society of her older sister to that of her quiet twin.

"Miss Davis has gone away and won't be back until it's too late," mourned gentle Irene, gazing sorrowfully down toward the low station house on the flats below.

"Mrs. Goodale's gone, too, and there ain't nobody else to housekeep for us," Rosslyn added plaintively, "'cept Mercy."

"But we'd be ist as dood as anjils wiv Mercy," lisped little Janie dejectedly, seeming to comprehend the tragedy of the situation as well as did the older children.

Slowly Tabitha turned toward her companion. Gloriana's gray eyes bravely met the questioning glance of the black ones. "Would your father——"

"*Our* father," Tabitha mechanically corrected her.

"Our father let you—us, I mean?"

"All summer, if he thought we wanted to; but it won't be that long."

"Only two weeks."

"Until Miss Davis gets back—or Mrs. Goodale."

"Do you think Mrs. McKittrick would leave the——"

"I don't know," confessed the older girl in worried accents. "It's a chance for him. I believe she'll take it. I'm sure we are old enough."

"And know enough about keeping house."

"They would be perfectly safe with us two."

"Supposing we ask her."

Impulsively, Tabitha started for the house with Gloriana at her heels; and the children, though not understanding the drift of the conversation they had just overheard, fell in behind the two, and marched in solemn procession up the path, feeling sure that something was about to happen which would clear

away the heavy cloud of despair hovering over their household.

Again Mrs. McKittrick was sitting beside the battered kitchen table with her head on her arms as they had found her the day before, but this time Tabitha did not hesitate. Breathlessly, excitedly, she began, almost before she was inside the house:

"Oh, Mrs. McKittrick, Mercy has told us all about it—how Miss Davis and Mrs. Goodale are away and you can't find anyone to leave the children with. But you mustn't stay here on that account! Glory and I will take charge of the house. Really, we know how to cook and can manage splendidly, I'm sure, if you will let us try. Miss Davis will soon be back and then she can look after everything. Two weeks isn't very long. No harm can come to us in that time, I know. We'd love to do it. Say you will go. It means so much to you——"

She had not intended to say just that, but misreading the look of wondering surprise in the tear-stained face lifted to hers, she blundered, hesitated, and stood silent and distressed in the middle of the floor, shifting

uneasily from one foot to the other, and looking so much like the frank, outspoken, bungling Tabitha of old, that Mrs. McKittrick could not refrain from laughing. It was an odd, hysterical, little laugh, to be sure, more pathetic than mirthful, but it relieved the sharp tension of the situation; and Gloriana, quick to take advantage of auspicious moments, broke in, "All you need to do is to say yes. We will be model housekeepers and take the best of care of the family."

"But—but—what about your father? He won't listen to such a plan, I'm sure."

"Now, don't you fret about that!" cried Tabitha joyfully, regarding the battle as good as won. "Daddy won't care a mite! Two weeks is such a little time. He will be glad to have us come."

"I believe—I better—take Janie. She is so small, and——"

"I believe you better not!" the black-eyed girl laughingly retorted. "She would be dreadfully in your way, no matter how good she is; and you want to be free to take care of your—patient. Now, where is your trunk? What clothes do you need to take? If you

will tell us where to find things, we will begin to pack at once while you are getting the house settled the way you want to leave it, and writing out your orders."

"'Cause we'll be ist as dood as anjils," lisped Janie, as the procession, at a signal from Mercedes, quietly trooped forth into the June sunshine once more, and, with radiant faces and happy hearts, skipped down to their boulder playhouse to celebrate.

CHAPTER II

TABITHA AND GLORIANA, HOUSEKEEPERS

"You really think you want to do it?" Mr. Catt glanced quizzically from one bright, girlish face to the other as his fingers gently stroked the red tresses and the black hovering so close to his knee.

"Sure, daddy!" promptly answered Tabitha, patting the arm nearest her in a fashion that a year before she never would have dreamed of.

"Perfectly sure!" repeated Gloriana, snuggling closer to the big armchair in which her adopted father sat, and smiling contentedly at thought of the new life opening up before her.

"Two weeks mean fourteen whole days," he warned them.

"Yes," they giggled, "fourteen whole days!"

"And six lively children can raise quite a racket."

"The house is too far from the rest of town for their noise to bother anyone else," Tabitha reminded him.

"That's another point. What would you do if burglars broke in at night? You would be too far from town to call help."

"There is nothing at McKittrick's to burgle," his daughter retorted triumphantly. "I am not afraid."

"Nor I," said Gloriana, though somewhat faintly, for of a sudden a new phase of the matter had presented itself. She *was* still afraid of the black desert nights, and burglars were a constant source of terror to her, though never in all her life had she encountered any of that species of mankind.

"The cottage on the cliff is no more isolated than our cottage here in the hollow, now that the Carsons are away," continued the black-haired girl. "It would be just as easy—easier, in fact, to get help if we needed it there, than here; for the McKittrick house is on the side of the mountain overlooking the town, while our place is hidden from the rest

of Silver Bow by that hill. We can see only the roof of the assayer's office from here, and that is the nearest building to ours except Carrie's house."

"That's true!" exclaimed Gloriana with such an air of relief that Mr. Catt could not refrain from smiling.

"And besides, nothing is going to happen in two weeks," continued Tabitha.

"Suppose Miss Davis doesn't return in two weeks? I thought you wanted to spend your summer at the beach."

"Oh, Miss Davis will be back on time," was the confident reply. "And we had planned to stay here a few weeks anyway, you know. Myra won't be looking for us before the first of July, for we had expected Tom would come home early in the summer for his vacation instead of having to wait until fall, and so made our plans accordingly."

He smiled at the grown-up air she had assumed, then sighed, for something in her quiet self-assurance and dignified poise suddenly brought home to him the realization that his little girl was fast growing up. The sensitive, rebellious, little spitfire of a few months ago

had developed into a charming, gentle-mannered maid; and while he rejoiced in gaining so sweet a daughter, he disliked to lose the wild, untamed elf who had so suddenly blossomed into a young lady before he could in any measure atone for the unhappy years of her loveless childhood. He would have kept her a little girl all her life, had he been able; but here she was springing up into the beauty of a glorious womanhood before his very eyes. So he sighed as he thought of his lost opportunities, then abruptly asked, "How old are you, Tabitha?"

"Going on sixteen, daddy."

"And you, my other daughter?" turning to Gloriana sitting silently on her low stool by his side.

"Fourteen, sir."

"Rather youthful housekeepers," he drawled, teasingly.

"But experienced in spite of youth," Tabitha gayly retorted. "Why, Miss King says we are the two most promising domestic science pupils she has. Now what do you think of that?"

"That she is right," came the prompt

though unexpected reply; "and if you really think you want to play Good Samaritan for a couple weeks, you have my hearty sanction. The fact of the matter is, I find it impossible to be here at home much for the next fortnight, myself; possibly not at all after to-night. So you might just as well be mothering the McKittricks as left alone in this end of the town, so far as I can see."

"I knew you would say yes," sighed Tabitha contentedly. "You shall see what model housekeepers your daughters can be. We'll make you proud of us."

"I have no doubt of it," he answered heartily. "But if you begin your arduous duties to-morrow, it is time you were in bed this minute. Fly away now!"

So they ran laughingly away to their room, both secretly glad of the chance to seek their pillows an hour earlier, for that day at the McKittrick cottage had been a busy one, and though neither would acknowledge it to the other, feet, arms and backs ached sadly. But the next morning, after a refreshing night's sleep, the duet was ready and eager for the novel role they were about to play; and just

as soon as their own simple tasks were done, the necessary clothes packed and the little cottage made secure for its two weeks of solitude, they tramped merrily up the steep path to the Eagles' Nest, and entered upon their summer vacation as housekeepers for a family of six, as Susie expressed it.

Everything was topsy-turvy in the excitement of getting the injured father, and weary, distracted mother started on their brief journey; but finally they were off, and a row of sober-faced children stood on the bluff overlooking the flats below, watching the train puff its way slowly out of sight behind the mountains.

With the last glimpse of the departing cars, the sense of responsibility in her new charge descended upon the shoulders of the volunteer housekeeper, and Tabitha was for a brief moment appalled at the task which she had so rashly undertaken.

"Six children to look after for two whole weeks!" she gasped in dismay. Then her courage returned with a rush. "Why, Tabitha Catt, you coward! I am ashamed of you! If you can't take care of six children for two

short weeks, particularly with Gloriana to help, you are not good for much!" Resolutely she turned toward the house, saying briskly, to hide her own wavering spirits, "Well, folkses, let's have chocolate pie for supper!"

"Oh, goody!" cried Inez, whirling about to follow her leader; and at mention of these words, the faces of the whole group brightened wonderfully.

"Can't we have some cake, too? Mamma said we might if you knew how to make it."

"Knew how to make it?" boasted Tabitha scornfully. "Well, I should say we do! What kind will you have?"

"Nut loaf," quickly responded Mercedes, who knew from experience how delicious Tabitha's nut loaves were.

"Angel cake," wheedled Susie, with her most engaging smile.

"Frosted with chocolate," added Inez.

"Devil's food," suggested Irene.

"Cookies," pleaded Rosslyn, who had a boy's fondness for that particular delicacy.

"Dingerbread," lisped the baby.

And Tabitha laughed. "That's quite a collection, my dears."

"I should say so!" gasped Gloriana. "We can't make them all to-night. In fact, it is nearly four o'clock now. There isn't time for both pie and cake."

"Unless we do make gingerbread, as Janie suggested," said Tabitha slowly, seeing the look of disappointment clouding the row of round, serious faces watching them so expectantly.

"Wiv raisins," coaxed Rosslyn. "Lots of 'em!"

Instantly the faces brightened again. "Oh, yes, that's the way we like it best," chorused the four older members.

"And let us seed them," pleaded Inez. "Mamma often lets us."

"She won't let us eat more'n twelve," added Irene hopefully, "and we can work real fast."

"Well, you will have to if we have gingerbread for supper," said Gloriana. "I supposed the raisins were already seeded. Will we have time, Tabitha?"

"Yes, if everyone hustles, I reckon. Mercy, you know where things are in the pantry. Supposing you get out the spices, sugar, flour, and things. Susie and the twins stone the

raisins; and, Rosslyn, you might bring in some small wood for the stove. We'll use the range to-night, because I have baked in that oven before and know how it works, but won't know until I experiment with it, how the gasolene oven bakes."

While she was issuing orders, Tabitha flaxed blithely about the little kitchen, lighting the fire, hunting up cooking utensils, and beginning the process of making chocolate pie, leaving Gloriana to wrestle with the mysteries of a raisin gingerbread.

Anxious for the coming treat, the children obediently flew to their various tasks; and soon voices buzzed busily, while the little hands tried their best to hurry.

"There!" breathed Tabitha at last, lifting a red, perspiring face from an inspection of two beautifully frosted pies in the oven, "they are done. Don't they look fine? Now you can put in your gingerbread whenever you are ready, Glory. I'll set these on the wash bench outside to cool, while I hustle up the rest of the supper."

"Mamma always puts her pies in the pantry window," volunteered Irene, not wishing to

have the tempting delicacy removed from her sight.

"But they will cool quicker in the open air," explained Tabitha. "And supper will be ready so soon that they won't be cool enough to eat if we set them in the window. Now, Mercy——"

"Oh, Kitty," came a sudden wail of alarm from the dooryard where Rosslyn was still busy with his basket of chips, "Janie is gone! I can't find her anywhere!"

Tabitha dropped her platter of cold potatoes which she was preparing to warm over; Mercedes hastily left her dishpan where she was piling up the soiled kitchen utensils which the youthful cooks had used with extravagant hand; Susie and the twins abruptly deserted the raisin jar; and all bolted for the door.

Only Gloriana remained at her post. She had arrived at the most critical stage of her gingerbread making, and though her first impulse was to join in the search for the missing baby with the rest of her mates, her thrifty bringing-up reminded her that in the meantime the cake would spoil. So she paused long enough to dump in the cupful of raisins still

standing on the doorsill, where the seeders had been sitting at their task. Giving the mixture a final beat, she poured the spicy brown dough into the baking sheet, thrust it into the oven, adjusted the dampers, and followed the example of the others, setting out down the rocky path as rapidly as her lameness would permit.

Meanwhile, toiling up the steep trail on the other side of the house, came a tiny, tired figure, almost ready to drop from her unusual exertions. Her dress was torn in a dozen places where the cruel mesquite had caught her as she passed, one shoe was unlaced, one stocking hung in rolls about the plump, scratched ankle, she wore no hat, and her fair hair was sadly tousled by the wind and her struggle through sagebrush and Spanish bayonets. Altogether, she presented a woeful spectacle; but in spite of it all, she clasped tightly in one chubby fist, a soiled and crumpled letter, which every now and then she examined critically, having discovered that the warmth and moisture of her fat hands left tiny, smudgy fingerprints on the white envelope, and being anxious to present a clean

document to her wondering audience when she should have reached her goal. But oh, it did seem so far up to the Eagles' Nest, and the way was so rough for her little feet! Still she kept plodding wearily along, and at length reached the end of her journey, only to find the house silent and deserted.

"Mercy!' she piped shrilly, pushing open the screen and stumbling into the hot kitchen. "I'se dot a letter! Where is you? Susie! Rossie!"

Still no answer. Puzzled at this unusual state of affairs, she raced from room to room as fast as her short, tired legs would carry her, but no one was there.

"Tabby!" she shrieked. "Dory! What did you leave me for?"

A panic seized her. She had been deserted! Tears gathered in her sea-blue eyes, and trickled in rivulets down her flushed cheeks. She was afraid to stay alone. Why had everyone left her? Back to the kitchen she pattered. It was empty, but a fire still burned in the stove and savory odors from the oven lured her on. Curiosity overcame her fear for a moment, and with a mighty tug, she jerked open

the door, revealing Gloriana's gingerbread just done to a turn.

"Dingerbread!" cried the child, gloating over the huge, golden sheet which smelled, oh, so good! "I want some now!" And forgetting that the oven was hot, she seized the pan with both chubby fists, but instantly let go her hold and roared with pain, for ten rosy fingers were cruelly burned, and how they did smart!

Suddenly above the wail of her lusty voice came the sound of excited voices and flying feet; and the next instant frightened Tabitha with her adopted brood in close pursuit, flew into the kitchen, and gathered up the hurt, sobbing baby in her arms, crooning tenderly, "There, there, dearie, you mustn't cry any more. We've all come back. We were hunting you. Where did you go?"

"Oh, see her hands!" cried Irene, shuddering in sympathy. "She has burned herself!"

"But the gingerbread isn't burned at all," volunteered Susie with satisfaction, after a keen and anxious scrutiny of the spicy loaf half-way out of the oven.

"For goodness' sake!" ejaculated Tabitha, not having noticed the seared fingers up to that moment. "What do you do for burns?"

"Bring some butter," ordered Gloriana, remembering Granny Conover's first remedy for burns.

"Mamma uses molasses," said Irene; and Susie and Inez, recovering their senses at the same instant, dived into the pantry, returning immediately, one with a crock of butter in her hand, and the other bearing a bucket of molasses; and before either of the older girls could intervene, they plunged both of Janie's dirty, scorched hands first into one dish and then into the other, leaving them to drip sticky puddles down the front of Tabitha's dress and on to the clean kitchen floor.

"Why, you little monkeys!" gasped the senior housekeeper, forgetting the dignity of her position in her wrath at what seemed inexcusable carelessness on the part of the girls.

"Mamma *always* puts molasses on burns," quavered Inez, her lip trembling at Tabitha's tone.

"And Glory said butter," surprised Susie

defended. Then both culprits dissolved in tears.

"There, there, never mind!" cried Tabitha in dismay. "I didn't mean to scold, but you ought to have known more than to stick the baby's dirty hands into the molasses pail and butter crock."

"Not dirty!" screamed the outraged Janie, striking the face above her with a dripping fist. "On'y burned! Ve pan was—" Her sentence unfinished, she found herself ruthlessly shaken and dumped into the middle of the floor, while angry Tabitha rushed out of the door into the cool dusk of early evening, leaving a dismayed family staring aghast at each other in the hot kitchen. Even the amazed baby forgot to voice her protest at such treatment, but stood where she had landed, staring with round, scared eyes after the fleeing figure.

Down the mountainside sped Tabitha to the big boulder, wheeled about and rushed back to the house as swiftly as she had left it, and before the astounded children had recovered their breath, she cried, "I am sorry I was cross. I reckon I'm a little tired and

everything has gone upside down and—suppose we have supper now. I know you are all hungry. Susie, while I am tying up Janie's hands, you might put the potatoes on in the frying pan; Irene, set the table; Inez, fetch the water; and Mercy, cut the bread. Is the gingerbread done, Gloriana?"

"Yes," responded the junior housekeeper proudly, "and already sliced for the table. Shall I bring in the pie?"

"The pies!" shouted the six McKittricks.

"I had forgotten all about them," confessed the older girl. "Yes, you better get them right away. One will be enough for supper,—the tins are so large."

While Tabitha was speaking, Gloriana had stepped briskly out of the door into the summer night and disappeared around the corner of the house; but immediately a terrified scream pierced the air, there was a loud snort and the sound of startled, scampering feet, and Gloriana burst into the room again bearing an empty plate in one hand and a dilapidated looking pie, minus all its frosting, in the other.

"Oh, our lovely pies!" wailed the children in chorus.

"The burros!" gasped Tabitha.

Gloriana nodded. "One had his nose right in the middle of this pie. The other beast had upset the second tin and was licking up the crumbs from the gravel."

"Oh, dear, I want some pie!" whimpered Rosslyn, puckering his face to cry.

"Ain't that the worst luck?" Susie burst out.

"If you had put the pies in the *window* to cool, like mamma does—" began Inez.

"It's too late to make any more to-night," Gloriana hastily interrupted, seeing a wrathful sparkle in Tabitha's black eyes; "but if you don't make any more fuss about it this time, we'll bake some to-morrow."

"And if you want any supper at all, you'd better come now," advised Mercedes, from her post by the stove, where she was vigorously making hash of the sliced potatoes. "This stuff is beginning to burn."

Gloriana rescued the frying pan, and the disappointed children gathered about the table, trying to look cheerful, but failing dismally.

"Don't want any 'tato," objected Janie, scorning the proffered dish. "Dingerbread!"

"Potato and beans first," insisted Tabitha.

"Dingerbread!" stubbornly repeated the child, so sleepy and cross that the weary older girl said no more, but slid a large slice of the savory cake into the little plate, and proceeded to help the other children in the same liberal manner. No one wanted beans and potato, but at the first mouthful of the tempting-looking gingerbread, everyone paused, looked inquiringly at her neighbor, chewed cautiously a time or two, and then eight hands went to eight pair of lips.

"I thought we stoned raisins for this cake," cried Susie, half indignantly.

"So you did," replied Gloriana, her face flushed crimson as she bent over her plate, intently examining her slice of cake.

"Oh, and put the stones in the cake! What did you do with the raisins?" demanded Inez.

Before Glory could frame a reply, or offer any excuse for the accident, Irene slid hurriedly off her chair, flew through the doorway

and down the path toward town, but she was back in a moment, and in her hand she held a cup of raisins.

"Why, Irene McKittrick!" cried Mercedes, lifting her hands in horror. "What made you hide them?"

"I didn't hide them," the twin indignantly protested. "The cup was in my lap when Rosslyn called that Janie was lost, and I forgot to put it down when I ran out-doors. I remembered it by the time we reached our playhouse, so I set it down there and that's where I found it now."

"Janie wasn't lost," interrupted that small maiden in drowsy tones. "Me went to get a letter."

"To get a letter!" chorused her sisters. "Where?"

"To the store where Mercy goes. A man dave me one, too," she finished triumphantly, squirming down from her high chair to search about the room for the missing epistle, while the rest of the family forgot both pie and gingerbread in joining in the hunt. Rosslyn found it at last under the stove where it had fallen when Janie began her investigation of

the oven; and the girls exclaimed in genuine surprise, "Why, it *is* a real letter!"

"Addressed to mamma," said Mercedes. "Do you suppose Janie really went to the post-office all alone?"

But Janie was fast asleep in her chair where she had retired when convinced that Rosslyn had actually found her precious letter; so the sisters once more bent curious eyes upon the soiled envelope.

"Better re-address it to your mother," suggested Tabitha, remembering that in her written instructions, Mrs. McKittrick had failed to mention the matter of mail which might come to Silver Bow for her.

"Mamma told me to open all her letters, and not even to send papa's to Los Angeles, unless 'twas something *very* important."

"Then why don't you open it?" cried Susanne impatiently.

"And see who wrote it," added Inez.

"I—I—guess I will." Deliberately she tore open the envelope, spread out the brief letter it contained, and with a comically important air, read the few short lines. Then beginning with the heading, she read it the

second time, her face growing graver at each word, until impatient Inez could stand the strain no longer, and burst out, "Well, what's it all about? Does it take you all night to read that teenty letter?"

"It's from Aunt Kate, Uncle Dennis' wife," Mercedes slowly retorted. "She is going to Europe for something, and wants to send the boys out here to us."

"Williard and Theodore?"

"Yes."

"But how can they, with papa hurt and mamma gone?"

"She says that they will pay good board and she knows mamma will be glad enough to get the money, seeing that papa's still unable to work."

Tabitha's face darkened. "It's an imposition!" she exploded wrathfully.

"I sh'd say so!" agreed Susanne. "They are dreadful noisy boys. We had 'em here once before, and Aunt Kate got awful mad 'cause papa licked 'em when they touched a match to the old shed to see how the people on the desert put out fires."

"She said they never should come again," added Inez, "but I guess she's forgot."

"How old are they?" ventured Gloriana.

"Williard's between me and Susie," Mercedes answered, "and Theodore's between Susie and the twins."

"Are you going to let them come?" demanded Irene.

Mercedes turned helplessly toward Tabitha. "What would you do, Kitty?" she asked. "Shall I write and ask mamma?"

"*I* shouldn't," Tabitha promptly replied. "Your mother has her hands full now, and it would only worry her to know how nervy your Aunt Kate is. *I'd* write *her,*—your aunt, I mean,—and tell her just how things stand, your father in the hospital and your mother with him. She *ought* to know more than to send them then. Still, I believe I'd just say that the boys can't come. She would understand that all right. And I'll be responsible, Mercedes, if your mother should think we ought to have told her about it first."

"*I'd* telegraph, so's to be sure," said Susanne. "Aunt Kate doesn't think much about other folks' wishes, and if she wanted

to go to Europe bad enough, she'd ship the boys to us if we all had smallpox."

"That's a good idea," Tabitha acknowledged. "We'll telegraph at once, and then she will have no excuse for not knowing how sick your father is. Where is there a pencil and paper? I'll write out a telegram now, and we'll slip down town, and send it to-night."

She hastily scribbled the words:

"Mrs. Dennis McKittrick,
Jamaica Plains, Mass.
Don't send boys. Father in Los Angeles hospital. Mother with him.
MERCEDES MCKITTRICK."

Then taking Irene as company, she carried the message to the telegraph station that same evening, to make sure it reached its destination in time to prevent the threatened visit from the unwelcome cousins.

"Perhaps I acted in a high-handed manner," she confessed to Gloriana, as they were preparing for bed that night, "but I couldn't bear to think of that selfish old cat—yes, that's what she is,—imposing upon Mrs. McKittrick again. I remember the boys, though it was

quite a while ago that they were here. They were only little shavers then, too. I never *met* them, but one doesn't have to in order to know all they want to know about their antics."

"And judging from our first day's experiences as housekeepers in this family, we shall have all *we* want to do, without two terrors of boys added."

"To-day has been rather hard and disappointing," Tabitha acknowledged with a gusty sigh.

"But to-morrow will be better," Gloriana comforted her. "And it is only for two weeks. That's one consolation."

"Thank fortune!" Tabitha exclaimed with fervor; and the tired eyelids closed over the drowsy black eyes and the gray.

CHAPTER III

UNWELCOME GUESTS

"WELL, one whole week is gone," said Tabitha exultantly, as she bent over the heaped-up mending basket one hot afternoon, and tried to make neat darns of the gaping holes in the heels of Susie's stockings.

"Yes, and half of the first day of the second week," Gloriana replied cheerily. "But really, Puss, time hasn't dragged as slowly as I feared. That first day was the longest, I think, I ever knew."

"That first day was a horrible nightmare," the older girl emphatically declared. "I thought it *never* would end, and I'd have quit my job on the spot if there had been anyone to take my place."

"I'd have quit it anyway if you had just said the word," laughed her companion. "I thought you'd never go to sleep that night—I wanted so badly to cry."

"Did you? So did I, but you kept tossing so restlessly that I knew you were still awake, and finally I dropped off without getting my cry at all."

"That's just what I did, too!" giggled Gloriana.

"And the next morning everything looked so different——"

"Yes, I could laugh then at the burro's nose in your lovely pie and the seeds in my gingerbread; but they didn't seem so funny the night before."

"They seemed anything but funny to me for several days, and I don't think I'll ever see a chocolate pie or a gingerbread again in my life without remembering this vacation."

"But things have gone splendidly since that first night," Gloriana reminded her. "The children have tried to be angels, even if they have executed some queer stunts for cherubs."

"Yes, I know, but I am glad just the same that half of our—apprenticeship—is over. If this week will pass as smoothly as last week did, it's all I'll— What in the world is the matter with the children? Sounds as if they

were having an Indian war dance. I wonder if those Swanberg boys are bothering again."

Both girls dropped their mending and hurried to the door just in time to hear Inez's voice say cuttingly, "Of course we know who you are, Williard and Theodore McKittrick!"

"Guess again!" drawled the older of two strange boys, lolling on suitcases in the middle of the yard.

"Well, those *are* your names," Inez insisted.

"You look enough like you used to when you were here before so we can't be mistaken," said Mercedes primly.

"Can't, eh? Well, our names are Williard and Theodore no longer. We are Billiard and Toady these days. Mind you don't forget! We've come to stay till the folks get back——"

"Didn't you get our telegram telling you not to come?" demanded belligerent Susie.

"Sure we did!"

"Then why didn't you stay at home?"

"'Cause ma had the arrangements all made to go across the ocean and there wasn't anyone else to send us to. Grandma's away travelling, and Aunt Helen's kids have got scarlet fever."

"But papa's in the hospital and mamma's there nursing him," said Irene indignantly.

"Truly?" The boy called Toady spoke for the first time.

"Do you think I'm lying?"

"Well, ma said she bet it was all a bluff to keep us from coming out here," Billiard explained, looking genuinely surprised at Irene's words.

"And anyway," supplemented Toady, "she said if it was true about your father and mother being away to Los Angeles, there'd have to be someone here to look after you kids, and two more wouldn't make much difference."

"Specially when she's paying for our board!"

Tabitha, a silent spectator in the doorway, ground her teeth in helpless rage, while Gloriana gasped audibly at the impudence of mother and sons.

"It's no more'n right that you should pay board," Susie declared in heat. "You make so much trouble wherever you go."

"Do, huh?" Billiard, frowning darkly, advanced threateningly toward his outspoken

cousin, with fists doubled up and an ugly sneer on his face. But Susie was no coward, and when he shook his knuckles close to her little pug nose to emphasize his words, the girl's arm shot out unexpectedly and landed a blow fair and square on one eye.

With a yell of rage and pain, the surprised boy lunged forward, but instead of confronting Susie, he found himself in the grasp of a tall, irate young lady, who wore her shining black hair pinned up on top of her head, although her skirts were still short enough to show a pair of trim ankles. "Now stop right here!"

She spoke quietly, almost too quietly; but one look into the smouldering depths of those big, black eyes was enough to cow the bully, and he jerked himself free, muttering sulkily, "She hit me first!"

"She had to, or get hit herself," bawled Inez, jigging excitedly from one foot to the other in her exultation over her cousin's defeat.

"Inez!"

"Well, he needn't have come! We telegraphed them not to!"

"*Inez!*"

The girl subsided, and Billiard found courage to leer triumphantly at her discomfiture. But Tabitha intercepted the glance, and in that ominously calm voice which had struck terror to his cowardly heart before, she announced, "It is too late now to think of that side of the question. We'll have to make the most of a bad situation; but I *will not* tolerate fighting. You may as well understand that first as last. If you boys can't behave like gentlemen, you can just move on down to the hotel. Is that plain?"

"Yes, sir—ma'am," stammered the abashed Billiard, glancing uneasily about for some means of escape, but Tabitha had delivered her ultimatum, and now swept grandly into the house, satisfied that she had displayed her authority in a very impressive manner.

Hardly had the screen closed behind her, however, when her sharp ears caught Billiard's hoarsely whispered question, "Who is that high-headed geezer?"

"The girl who is taking care of us," answered Mercedes unguardedly.

"Girl?"

"Sure! What did you take her for?"

"A—a new woman. A—one of these things that's trying to vote and do men's work and such like."

"Oho!" yelled the McKittrick girls in unison. "Why, she ain't much older'n us!"

"She goes to Ivy Hall in Los Angeles, the boarding school I belong to," said Mercedes.

"Honest Injun?"

"Cross my heart!"

"Huh!"

And instinctively Tabitha knew that there was trouble ahead for her. "Isn't this the worst luck you ever heard of?" she groaned to Gloriana when once inside the house again.

"If I had my way about it, I'd ship them straight home on the next train," declared the red-haired girl angrily. "The very idea of their mother doing such a thing as that! What kind of a woman is she, anyway?"

"I don't know much about her, except that she is utterly selfish and very rich. The boys are sent away to school most of the year; and during vacations she manages to shift them onto some of her relatives. Fortunately, Jim McKittrick is too far away to be bothered with them very often."

"But what shall you—we do with them? Shall we tell Mrs. McKittrick that they have come?"

"Goodness, no! At least not yet. It would just worry her more than ever and she is worn to distraction now. No, we must make the best of it this week, and by that time Miss Davis will be here. She was raised in a family of boys and ought to know how to manage them."

"Well, I am thankful *I* am not in her shoes," breathed Gloriana. "I suppose we can get along somehow for the six days that are left. Where shall you put them?"

"Well, I declare! I had forgotten all about that part of it. They will think I am a real hospitable hostess." She stepped to the door to call them, but not a soul was in sight anywhere. Two open suitcases lay on the ground with their contents scattered all about, but both owners and their cousins had disappeared.

"Mercedes! Susie!" she called peremptorily, but no one answered; and not even the sound of their voices at play fell on her listening ear. "Strange," she muttered. "They

were here a minute ago. Where can they have gone so quickly?"

She was about to start on a tour of investigation when a series of wild, piercing screams of abject terror rent the air, and Rosslyn came stumbling down the steep incline behind the house, bruised, scratched, torn, and covered from head to foot with what looked like blood. Gloriana caught him as he fell, for Tabitha turned faint and sick at the sight; but a shout of boyish disgust from above brought her to her senses.

"Aw, come back, you bawl baby! We were just foolin'! You ain't hurt a mite!" Billiard swaggered into view from behind a tall boulder half-way up the mountainside, and even Tabitha shuddered at the spectacle he presented, for he was togged out in war paint and feathers till he looked fiendish as he brandished a tomahawk in one hand and an evil-looking knife in the other. At sight of the girl on the narrow piazza, he hastily retreated behind the rocks again; but Tabitha was there almost as soon as he. Snatching the gorgeous headdress from the culprit's head, she trampled it ruthlessly in the sharp

gravel, disarmed the would-be Indian brave, breaking the treasured tomahawk and knife against the rocks, and shook the cowering savage with strong, relentless hands. But not a word did she speak, and though her victim writhed and squirmed and wriggled, he could not break the fierce grip on his shoulders.

"Don't, don't," he blubbered in desperation. "I didn't mean to scare him so bad. We were only playing Indian."

"Only—playing—Indian!" panted Tabitha, in scorching scorn. "Look at those children! You have frightened them all to death!" Pausing an instant in her vigorous shaking, she pointed at the circle of sisters,—Mercedes, weak and trembling, bent over the limp form of little Janie, blowing frantically in the still, white face; a thoroughly subdued and frightened Toady was wildly fanning poor Irene, who had likewise crumpled in a faint; while close by sat Susie and Inez clinging to each other and sobbing in terror.

"Oh, I didn't mean to!" bellowed Billiard, as Tabitha resumed her shaking. "I thought they'd seen Indians before."

"And so they have, but not such horrible savages as you!" Shake! Shake! Shake!

Irene sighed faintly and opened her eyes. Toady's heart gave a violent thump of relief and thanksgiving, and abruptly dropping the headdress of feathers which he had been using as a fan, he flew to his brother's rescue.

"Oh, please, Mrs. Tabitha," he pleaded, "you've drubbed him enough. Shake me if you ain't through yet. You'll have him plumb addled! Really, we were just in for some fun. We never dreamed the kids would scare so easy. That's only vegetable dye on Rosslyn's head. He thought we had scalped him, but we didn't mean to hurt him."

Tabitha glanced down into the entreating brown eyes at her elbow, straightway forgave Toady, and released her victim so suddenly that he fell sprawling into a nest of sharp-thorned Mormon pears; but of this she was unaware, for with one swoop she gathered up the now hysterical baby, and stalked off toward the house, saying grimly, "You boys stay right where you are until you are willing to apologize and promise to behave yourselves in the future. I've a mind to turn you over

to the sheriff now. Come, girls!" Followed by the troop of white, shivering sisters, she disappeared within doors, and soon quiet reigned in the Eagles' Nest.

Only then did the cowed Billiard venture to peer from his retreat at the house below. It was nearing the supper hour and he was hungry, but Tabitha had said he must apologize and promise good behaviour before he would be admitted to the family circle. It was evident that she meant business.

"Toady," he whispered to the other boy, sitting silent and motionless where he had dropped when Tabitha had left them an hour before. "Toady, can you see anyone down there?"

Toady glanced off at the hazy flat below with its winding silver ribbon of railroad track, and the lonely, dingy station house, and shook his head.

"Aw, not there!" Billiard protested, seeing that his brother's thoughts had evidently been running in the same channel. "Down to Uncle Jim's, I mean."

Scarcely shifting his position, dutiful Toady craned his neck around a boulder, surveyed the

quiet mountainside in the waning afternoon light, and again shook his head.

"Creep down and see what they're doing. Maybe they are talking about us."

"Go yourself," returned Toady briefly.

"Aw, come now, Toady! She ain't so mad at you, and besides, you're littler. They wouldn't see you so quick."

Still Toady remained seated.

"We'll have to have some water to wash off this stuff before she'll let us in to—to apologize," wheedled Billiard.

"*Are* you going to apologize?"

"Looks like we got to," answered the older boy gloomily. "She's a reg'lar cyclone. Smashed up half our things already, and like enough she will sick the sheriff on us like she said, 'nless we do—er—apologize."

It was very evident that Billiard was not in the habit of apologizing for anything; and Toady, grinning with no little satisfaction at his brother's discomfiture, arose and slowly descended by a roundabout trail to the cottage. He was gone a long time and Billiard was growing decidedly restless and anxious when he appeared in sight once more. "She's—

they are going to write to Uncle Hogan!" he announced breathlessly.

"Uncle Hogan!" cried Billiard in dismay.

"Yes, that's just what I heard them say. Mercedes told her how Uncle Hogan——"

"I'll get even with Miss Mercedes," Billiard interrupted fiercely.

"You better get that paint off your face and hike for the house with your apology," advised the more easily persuaded brother, "else you'll never have a chance to get even with anybody again."

"Why?"

"Because if we don't promise to be good inside of an hour, they are going to ask the—the—some man, sort of a policeman, I guess, to look after us until Uncle Hogan answers."

"Do you really think they'd write to Uncle Hogan?"

"Sure! Tabitha knows him. She and that Glory girl with the red hair kept him all night last winter off some mountain he wanted to climb 'cause they didn't know who he was. She had a gun and shot at them; but when her father got there he said 'twas all right, and

Uncle Hogan thinks Tabitha is the whole cheese now."

"Supposing we do—apologize, will they write to him still?"

"No, I guess not. If you'll promise to behave, they will let you stay until some woman who's going to take care of the kids most of the summer gets here. Then *she* can do as she pleases about writing. You better knuckle under, Billiard."

The older boy groaned. "You don't seem to care very much," he complained bitterly, feeling that Toady had deserted him at the most critical moment.

"I—I've apologized already," acknowledged the other. "I'd rather do that than have Uncle Hogan get after us."

"So would I," Billiard sulkily decided, and pulling himself up from his rocky seat, he slowly shambled down the mountainside, with Toady at his heels hugely enjoying his brother's humiliation, for, though comrades in mischief, the older boy loved to bully the younger, and Toady had a long list of scores to settle, so he could not refrain from grinning broadly behind Billiard's back, particularly

since his part of the disagreeable program had already been accomplished.

"Better wash your face, first," he suggested, as Billiard made straight for the kitchen door, through which savory odors of supper cooking were beginning to steal.

"Aw, come off!"

"She won't let you in till you do."

"Well, then, where's the water?"

Toady pointed toward a basin on a nearby rock, and Billiard made a vigorous, if somewhat hasty toilet. Then, after a moment's further hesitation, he entered the kitchen with hanging head, and, addressing a grease spot on the floor by Tabitha's feet, muttered surlily, "I—er—apologize."

Tabitha's lips twitched. He looked so utterly downcast and abject that she could scarcely keep from smiling openly. "Are you ready to promise to behave yourself from now on?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, ma'am," he gulped, flushing angrily as the girls tittered.

Tabitha instantly silenced their mirth, and turning to the boy, said graciously, "Then we'll let bygones be bygones; but we'll have

no more such actions while you stay. Your suitcase is in the back bedroom. Toady will show you. But first, please bring in a couple armfuls of wood. It looks like rain and——"

"Wood! We never bring in wood at home!" the boy rebelled.

"You are not at home now," Tabitha answered sweetly.

"But—we're paying board!"

"I haven't seen any board money yet. And anyway, we need the wood."

Angrily the boy jerked out a purse from his trousers pocket and slammed some gold pieces on the table.

"Twenty dollars," she counted. "For how long?"

"All summer."

"Ten weeks! Two dollars a week for two of you! Board on the desert is cheap at a dollar a day. You can write your mother to that effect; and in the meantime, perhaps you better put up at the hotel——"

"Oh, she said if anyone made a fuss, she'd pay more," Billiard hastily explained, for somehow the hotel idea did not appeal to him.

"Well, you tell her a dollar a day for each

of you is the regular rate. And now you will have just about time to get that wood before supper is ready."

Billiard glanced questioningly up into the clear, olive face above him, as if he could not believe his ears.

"The pile is close to the door," she continued, paying no attention to the amazement in his face: "and the woodbox is on the screened porch."

Billiard hesitated, opened his lips as if to speak, closed them again, and inwardly raging, but outwardly meek, marched out of the door to the woodpile.

CHAPTER IV

MISCHIEF MAKERS

TABITHA retired late that night, weary but triumphant, congratulating herself that Billiard was conquered; but she had reckoned without her host. Two little heathen such as Williard and Theodore McKittrick are not to be converted in one day, nor are they apt to be forced into reforming. Brought up with utter disregard for other people's rights, by a mother who bore them no particular love, but who surrounded them with every luxury money could buy simply because she found it less trouble to indulge than to deny them, it is scarcely to be wondered at that they had no idea of honor or obedience.

Their father, Dennis McKittrick, had been more successful than his brothers in his struggle for wealth. After amassing a comfortable fortune, he had not lived to enjoy

it, and before his oldest son had seen his sixth birthday, the father was laid to rest in the shadow of a resplendent monument in an Eastern cemetery; and the rearing of the two boys was left wholly to their fashion-plate mother, whose only gods were dress and personal pleasure. Tabitha had heard many stories of the selfish, heartless woman, who found her motherhood a burden rather than a blessing, but she did not understand the difficulties one must contend with in attempting to reform such lawless youths, and being little more than a child herself, it was only natural that she should make mistakes.

But she did not at once realize this fact, for Billiard, completely surprised by the unusual treatment accorded him, was a model of obedience and politeness for the next two days, and Tabitha was deceived into thinking his reformation was genuine and lasting; while in reality, the young scapegrace was merely studying the unique situation and plotting how to "get even" with the girl who already had mastered him twice. A coward at heart, he knew he could not come out openly and fight her, so he slyly planned little annoyances to

hinder her work and try her patience. Yet so adroitly did he manœuvre that Tabitha was some time in finding out the real culprit.

"My brefus food ain't nice," wailed Janie, the third morning of her cousins' stay.

"Nor mine, either," protested Rosslyn, tasting his critically, and wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"You've salted it something fierce," said Billiard, winking solemnly at Toady while Tabitha was busy sampling her dish of porridge.

"It's so salt that sugar doesn't sweeten it," added Susie, making a wry face at the first mouthful and taking a hasty swallow of water.

Tabitha's mystified face quickly cleared. Seizing the sugar-bowl, she cautiously tasted its contents, and turning toward Inez, said accusingly, "You filled it with salt instead of sugar!"

"Then someone put the salt cup in the sugar barrel," cried Inez indignantly, "'cause I just poured one cupful into the sugar-bowl."

"Well, be more careful the next time," admonished the black-eyed girl, retreating to the pantry for a fresh supply of sweetening;

and Billiard, elated at the success of his first attempt, determined to try again.

"What in the world did you put in that salad dressing, Glory?" cried Tabitha, snatching up her glass of water with eager hands.

"What's the matter with it?" demanded the second cook, whose turn it was to wait upon the table that day.

"You used ginger 'stead of mustard," scolded Toady, who had a particular aversion for red hair, and took little pains to conceal it.

Gloriana had her suspicions as to how such an accident could have happened, but a hurried visit to the pantry disclosed the spice cans in their proper places, all correctly labelled; so she reluctantly admitted her mistake, but decided to keep her eyes open.

"There's soap in my glass of water," complained Irene at the next meal.

"Soap!" echoed Mercedes. "I washed those glasses myself, and never used a bit of soap on them! That's the way mamma told us to wash them."

But the fact still remained that not only was Irene's glass soapy, but more than half the

dishes on the table tasted of Fels Naptha. Tabitha looked concerned, but Billiard and Toady were so innocent appearing that she never suspected them of having had a hand in the affair.

The next time it was Tabitha's biscuits. When they appeared on the table they were as thin as wafers and as hard as bricks. In some way she had substituted corn starch for baking powder; but as another hurried visit to the pantry showed both articles where they belonged on their respective shelves, she concluded that carelessness on her part had caused the trouble, and let the matter drop.

Then the house began to be infested with all sorts of obnoxious insects and reptiles. Mercedes found two huge grasshoppers in the soup one day; a long, wriggling centipede fell out of the cook-book as Tabitha turned its pages in search of a favorite recipe; a scorpion dropped off the cake plate which Gloriana was in the act of passing, so frightening the girl that she dashed cake, dish and all onto the floor, and promptly had hysterics. Horned toads, ugly lizards, and worms of every description made their appearance by

the dozen, until even Tabitha grew alarmed; but still she did not suspect the cause of such an invasion, as the two brothers were apparently as docile and obedient as their gentler cousins.

Even when they found a dead rattler coiled up in the middle of the kitchen floor, Tabitha attributed it to Carrie's dog, General, who still spent much of his time at the McKittrick cottage. Nor did she notice that the reptile was coiled in a most impossible manner, with its head propped up by two tiny wires. She merely hustled the thing out of doors, hacked it into pieces with the axe, and buried the remnants under a pile of rocks to make sure no harm came of them. It never occurred to her to wonder how General, who was not allowed in the house, could have dragged the snake inside without someone seeing or hearing him, for he was proud of his snake-killing accomplishment and always made a big commotion when he succeeded in trapping one. So the culprits enjoyed the girls' scare, and retired to the water-tank behind the assayer's office to hatch up some new scheme.

Only Gloriana, whose cordial dislike for boys, caused by her unhappy experiences in Manchester, made her suspicious of all that species of humanity, seemed aware of what was going on, but she could not catch them red-handed. And knowing that she suspected them, the brothers made life miserable for her in a hundred ways. They hid her crutch in the most out-of-way places, adroitly misplaced her cooking utensils, or whatever article she was about to use, causing her many a long and annoying search when she was in a hurry. They stopped the clock or set it ahead with aggravating frequency; and discovering that the plucky girl grimly bore their tormenting in silence, they grew bolder, jumping out at her from unexpected corners, tweaking her long braids, tripping her up, and calling her "Carrots," or "Red-top," when Tabitha was out of hearing, for they still entertained a wholesome fear of that strong-armed, hot-tempered little housekeeper, who demanded instant obedience from her charges, and was able to enforce her authority by main strength if necessary.

Also, they felt a certain boyish admiration

for the tall, lithe girl who bore such a record for bravery, though not for the world would they have admitted the fact, even to each other; and they could not resist plaguing her on the sly whenever a chance presented itself. But to tease her openly was out of the question; so Gloriana received a double share of tormenting, which she bore with such uncomplaining fortitude that the boys forgot to be cautious, and one afternoon while Tabitha was in town on an errand, Mercedes came upon them as they were limping about the kitchen in an exaggerated fashion chanting with tuneless voices,

"Baa-baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full;
One for the master, one for the dame,
And one for the 'gory head' who limps awful lame."

Tears were standing in the tired gray eyes, but Gloriana, with her back resolutely turned toward her tormentors, scrubbed her pan of vegetables more vigorously, and tried not to hear the taunting words, though she knew from the sound of their steps that the boys were

circling nearer and ever nearer, and would soon jerk off her hair-ribbon or poke her in the back.

"Cowards!" exploded Mercedes wrathfully. "You'd never dare do that if Tabitha was here! I'm going to tell her just how mean you are!"

"Tattletale, tattletale!" jeered Billiard, taking a rapid survey of the yard as he limped past the door, to see if the other housekeeper had by any chance returned from the post-office.

"You wait and see what you get when Tabby finds out what you have been doing," threatened the girl; and the little name slipping inadvertently from her tongue gave the boys another inspiration.

"Tabby Catt, Tabby Catt," they began in unison, "where have you been?
I've been to Silver Bow to buy me a bean.
Tabby Catt, Tabby Catt, what saw you there?
I saw 'Gory Hanner' with her fearful red hair."

So intent were they upon rendering their new song, that neither boy heard the screen

open and close softly behind him, but Mercedes caught a glimpse of the set, white face and flashing eyes through the doorway, and held her breath in mingled fear and expectation.

"Billy goat, Billy goat, where have you been?" a low, ominous voice interrupted; and the two tormentors came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the floor, paralyzed at the unexpected appearance of the black-haired girl.

"A-chewing the whiskers, that grow under my chin," the voice calmly finished, and seizing the pan of dirty water from which Gloriana had just rescued the last potato, Tabitha dashed its contents over the astonished duet. Then realizing that once more she had let go of her fiery temper, she fled from the house up the trail to a great boulder on the summit of the mountain, and threw herself face down in an abandon of shame, remorse and despair.

"Oh, dear, why can't I be good?" she sobbed. "Just when I think I can hold onto myself and be ladylike no matter how mad I get, something comes up to show me that I'm mistaken. I'm just as hateful as Billiard! Oh, dear! And I thought he was being so

good, and all the while he was doing mean things behind my back. I make a miserable fizzle of everything I undertake. What would Mrs. McKittrick say if she could have seen me a few minutes ago? Now I've lost all the hold I had on the boys. They can't respect anyone who doesn't control her temper any better than I.

"How I wish I had never offered to take care of the tribe of McKittrick! No, that isn't so, either, for then the mother couldn't have gone inside with Mr. McKittrick, and perhaps the operation would have killed him. I'm glad he had his chance, bad boys or no bad boys! But oh, I am so thankful that Miss Davis will soon be home. I will never play housekeeper again, never! But now,—how can I make it right with Billiard and Toady? What a world this is to live in! Always stepping on someone's toes and then having to beg pardon. The trouble of it is I—I don't believe I am very sorry that I doused the boys. I am sorry I got so mad and did such a hateful thing, of course, but they deserved more than they got. And yet they aren't to blame, either, after the bringing up they have had. I suppose—it's

up to me—to do the apologizing act—myself—this trip."

Drying her eyes and taking a firm grip on herself, she descended from her refuge and sought out the boys in their room.

"Come in," Billiard called gruffly in response to her knock, though inwardly he was quaking with fear lest it might be the sheriff or Uncle Hogan, whose authority he had never but once dared to defy. So he was visibly relieved when he saw Tabitha standing alone on the threshold, but waited uncertainly for her to state her errand.

She was as anxious as they to have the ordeal over with, and plunged into the middle of her carefully framed speech, saying briefly, "I came to ask your pardon for my rudeness of a few minutes ago. I forgot myself. It was wrong of me to speak and act as I did, no matter how great the provocation."

Her wandering gaze suddenly fell upon Billiard's face, just in time to see him wink wickedly at Toady, and her good resolutions abruptly took wing. "But you deserved every bit you got," she finished fiercely, "and the next time I'll *souse you in the rain barrel!*"

Slamming the door in their surprised faces, she marched majestically away to the kitchen, and furiously began beating up a cake, so chagrined over this new defeat of her plans that she could not keep the tears from her eyes.

Suddenly a meek voice at her elbow spoke hesitatingly, "Say, Tabitha, we've apologized to Gory Anne—Gloriana, I mean. Will you —excuse—me for what we said about you, too?"

Toady's big, beseeching, brown eyes met hers unflinchingly—he certainly knew how to look angelic when occasion demanded it—and Tabitha relented.

"Yes, Toady, I'll excuse *you*," she said with meaning emphasis, which was not lost on the older brother, keeping well in the background.

"I—I'm ready to be excused, too," Billiard gulped at length, shuffling forward a few steps, but not raising his eyes from the floor.

"Very well," she answered coldly. "But don't you dare bother Gloriana again. I won't stand for it!"

"No, ma'am," Billiard responded meekly; and the two boys made good their escape, feeling very virtuous indeed.

CHAPTER V

IRENE'S SONG

"MISS DAVIS gets home to-day," sang Tabitha under her breath, as she drew on her slippers that bright, hot morning. "Do you know that, Gloriana Holliday?"

"Haven't I been counting every minute,—yes, every second for the past twenty-four hours?" laughed the second girl, letting down her luxuriant auburn mane and beginning to brush it vigorously. "But I had a horrible dream last night. I thought she sent us her wedding announcements, and we had to stay here all summer."

"False prophet! How dare you dream such a thing as that? Didn't we have a letter from her just two days ago saying she would reach here on to-day's train? And anyway, dreams always go by contraries, you know."

"It's mighty lucky they do in this case,"

Gloriana replied seriously. "But I woke in a cold sweat, the dream was so very real. I couldn't help wondering if something *had* delayed her so she wouldn't reach here as soon as we had expected."

"What a pessimist you are!" cried Tabitha, eyeing her companion in surprise. "You are usually just the opposite. What is the matter with you to-day, Glory?"

"Oh, I just somehow feel it in my bones that something is going to happen——"

"To be sure! Miss Davis is coming home and relieve us of our job."

"Something disappointing, I mean."

"Well, you just get that feeling out of your bones right away!" commanded Tabitha, thrusting the last pin into her shining, black hair and whisking into her big, kitchen apron. "You must have the rheumatism and that is bad for one's health. One more meal after this, and—exit Tabitha Catt and Gloriana Holliday, housekeepers."

Gloriana laughed, as, with a comical flourish and backward courtesy, the black-haired girl disappeared through the door, but her gay spirits were contagious, and presently the

younger maid joined her companion in the kitchen, singing softly:

"'Maxwellton's braes are bonnie
Where early fa's the dew,
And 'twas there that Annie Laurie
Gave me her promise true.'"

"There, that sounds better," Tabitha commented. "Really, I was beginning to get shivers of misgiving myself from your gloomy forebodings in the other room. What shall we have for dinner in honor of the occasion? Green peas, asparagus tips, French potatoes and caramel pudding? Or shall we invest in some strawberries at two bits a box and have shortcake for dessert?"

Merrily she skipped about the kitchen, making ready the simple breakfast for the hungry brood; and when that was out of the way, and the house swept and dusted, the two housekeepers began preparations for an elaborate dinner.

"To celebrate our release from bondage," laughed Gloriana, browning the sugar for a caramel pudding, while Tabitha carefully concocted her best layer cake. So busy were they

that the morning flew by as on wings, and before either was aware of the hour, a shrill blast of a whistle proclaimed the approach of a locomotive.

"The train!" gasped Tabitha.

"And we haven't tidied the children up or changed our own dresses," mourned Gloriana.

"I intended to meet Miss Davis at the station, to be sure she came here for dinner," wailed the other.

"It's too late now to do that, but we can make the youngsters a little more presentable before the 'bus comes up from the depot," suggested the younger girl.

"They certainly will need cleaning up by this time, I'll admit. Call them, will you, please?"

Gloriana stepped to the door and yodelled shrilly, but there was no answering trill, save the echo thrown back by the mountain peaks.

"Decamped again!" sighed Tabitha impatiently. "Did you ever see a bunch of children who could do the disappearing act as quickly or as completely as the tribe of McKittrick? If you will watch these potatoes, I will

go hunting. They were here only a few seconds ago, seems to me."

Briskly she circled the house. Not a chick nor a child was anywhere in evidence. Down to the boulder playhouse, up the trail to the summit, but nowhere were the children to be found. Tabitha became alarmed. What mischief had Billiard led them into now? He had been perfectly angelic for twenty-four hours. It was time for another outbreak.

Shading her eyes with her hand, she anxiously surveyed the surrounding hillsides, the gray flat below, the dingy station house, and presently her sharp eyes espied a procession of lagging figures straggling down the steps from the depot platform.

"Can it be—" she began. "Yes, I do believe it is! Horrors! Whatever will Miss Davis say when she sees that bunch of dirty ragamuffins! One, two, three, four—Billiard is lugging Janie pickaback, and Mercy and Toady have made a chair for Rosslyn. Yes, that is my family!"

She turned to go back to the house, but another thought had suddenly occurred to her. "Miss Davis! She's not with them. Can it

be she didn't come? Was Gloriana right after all? She surely would not let the children plod home in the heat while she rode in the 'bus. No, there are only eight people in that bunch and they are all children. Oh, dear, suppose Glory's dream has come true!"

Mechanically she turned back to the house, and her comrade in misery, catching a glimpse of her disturbed face, cried in alarm, "Can't you find any of them?"

"Yes, they have been to the depot."

"The little rascals! Without so much as asking leave! And it is such a long walk for Rosslyn and Janie!"

"I suppose Billiard put them up to it," Tabitha murmured, glad that Glory had not asked about Miss Davis; and she fell to dishing up potatoes with such reckless energy that the hot fat slopped over and blistered her hand.

"Oh!" cried Gloriana pityingly, "you have burned yourself. Let me finish taking them up."

"No, it's nothing. Serves me right for getting so provoked. I do wish I could learn to control my temper."

Gloriana remained discreetly silent, thinking that Tabitha was angry because of the children's latest escapade; and in silence they finished dinner preparations, both waiting anxiously, nervously for the runaways' return.

At length they heard them coming up the steep path from town, and Susie flew through the door with two letters in her hand. "They are both for you, Tabitha," she panted. "One's from mamma. I'd know her writing in the dark. Miss Davis didn't come on to-day's train, but I s'pose likely she'll be here to-morrow, don't you think?"

Tabitha snatched the envelopes from Susie's outstretched hand, and ripped them open with one stroke of the knife she held, muttering feverishly, "The other is from Miss Davis." Her quick eyes swept the page at a single glance, it seemed, and a smothered groan escaped her.

"What is it?" ventured Gloriana timidly, the morning's foreboding gripping her anew.

"She has broken her leg."

"Broken her leg!" repeated the red-haired girl dully.

"Broken her leg!" echoed mystified Susie.

"Who? Mamma?"

"Miss Davis."

"Holy snakes!"

"Why, Susie!"

"I mean—I—I—that just slipped out accidental. I was so s'prised at wondering what we'd do with a broken-legged woman hopping around here."

"But she won't be hopping around here," Tabitha grimly told her. "She must stay flat on her back in bed for three weeks, and then it will be days and days before she can get around without a crutch."

"Then—who—will housekeep—for us?" gasped Susie. "I reckon it is up to you to stay a while longer. Mrs. Goodale's grandbaby's got the fever and she is going to stay in Carson City until he's well. He is the only grandbaby she's got."

"How did you hear that?" demanded Tabitha, her heart sinking within her at Susie's words.

"Don't we know the Goodales well? She has only one girl, and that girl has only one baby."

"Oh, I didn't mean that! Where did you hear that the baby was sick?"

"Mr. Porter told us at the station. He has just got home from Carson City, and he saw Mrs. Goodale there. Why don't you read mamma's letter? You hain't looked at it yet."

Tabitha had completely forgotten the second envelope, and now hurriedly drew out the written page and scanned the blurred, uneven lines. Then without a word of explanation, she slipped the paper back into its envelope, and dropped it into her pocket, saying only, "Let the children have their dinner now. Everything is ready."

But all through the meal she was unusually preoccupied, puzzling, pondering, struggling, longing to be alone with herself, and yet held to her post by her sense of duty. At last, however, the hungry appetites were satisfied, the chattering children had gone back to their play, the dishes were washed and piled away in the cupboard, and Tabitha slipped away to the little room which she shared with Gloriana and Janie, knowing that no one would molest her here as long as the lame girl stood guard at the door.

Once alone, she spread the two letters out on the bed before her and read and re-read them until she knew both word for word.

Only one course lay open to her, that was plain; but yet her heart rebelled hotly against the circumstances which made this one course the only right one.

"There never was such a girl for getting into scrapes," she groaned. "And this time I've not only got myself into one, but Gloriana as well. It will be six weeks at the very least before Miss Davis can come home, and there is no telling when Mrs. Goodale will be back. It is out of the question for Mrs. McKittrick to leave her husband just when he needs her most, even though she does offer to come. No, it's up to me, as Susie says. And I did want to go to Catalina with Myra so much! Here's my whole summer spoiled just because of a hasty promise.

"*Tabitha Catt!* Aren't you ashamed of yourself! You know right well that Mrs. McKittrick never could have gone to the city if you hadn't taken charge of her children, and the chances are that Mr. McKittrick would have died without her. He isn't wholly out of

danger even yet. You selfish wretch! What do you think of a person who will talk the way you have been doing? Oh, dear, what a queer world it is! I wouldn't mind so much if Gloriana didn't have to suffer, too; but it is too bad to keep her here on the boiling desert when she might be enjoying life on the Island or at the beach. It wouldn't be so bad if those awful boys weren't here, either; but they are the *limit*. I am on edge every minute of the day, looking for the next outbreak. I don't believe they *can* be good. And yet—there's no other way—out of it. I can't let Mrs. McKittrick come home just because I am too utterly selfish to stay here myself. She has been *so* good to me. And it is positively out of the question for her to have the children with her."

Undecided, rebellious, unhappy, Tabitha crossed the room to the window, and stood looking out over the barren mountainside. Should she? Could she? What ought she to do? On the other side of a little gully just opposite the window, sat Irene, rocking to and fro on a teetering stone, and singing in a high, sweet treble to a battered rag-doll, hugged tightly to her breast. The words floated up to

the girl in the window, indistinct at first, but growing clearer as the singer forgot her surroundings; and Tabitha suddenly found herself listening to the queer, garbled words of the song that fell from the childish lips.

"What in creation does she think she is singing?" she asked herself in amazement, recognizing with a fresh pang the tune Gloriana had begun the day with.

Irene finished the verse and commenced again:

"Maxwellton breaks her bonnet,
And nearly swallows two,
An' 'twas their hat and her locket
Gave me a pummy stew.
Gave me a pummy stew
Which near forgot can be,
And for bonnet and a locket
I'd lame a downy deed."

Three times she repeated the distorted version of that grand old song, and somehow the frown of perplexity smoothed itself from the listener's brow.

"Dear little girl," she whispered; "it's your father and your mother! I am a selfish old

heathen! Of course I will stay as long as I am needed!"

Quietly returning to the kitchen where Gloriana sat pretending to sew, she laid the mother's letter on the table before the seamstress, and when the gray eyes had read the message and glanced inquiringly up at the dark face beside her, Tabitha nodded her head. "Yes," she half-whispered. "I can't desert them now." Then after a moment of silence, she added, "But you will go with Myra, Glory. Please! I'd feel so much better, knowing that you were having a good time."

The red head shook a vigorous denial. "I shall stay with you," Gloriana declared. "I knew you wouldn't leave here as long as you were needed, and you needn't think I'll let you stay alone. I shouldn't have a good time at all if I did such a thing as that, Tabitha."

"But it may mean all summer," Tabitha protested. "And it does get so hot here. Besides, there will be little fun in such a vacation."

"Then it is up to us to *make* some fun," said Gloriana firmly.

"That's so," Tabitha replied, startled at the

thought. "Maybe the boys wouldn't be such trials then. Let's try it!"

"All right," agreed Gloriana.

And straightway the two girls put their heads together to devise some method of breaking the deadly monotony of the desert days, and bringing added enjoyment to their troublesome charges.

CHAPTER VI

GLORIANA'S BURGLARS

THERE was a glorious moon that night, and as the girls were washing the supper dishes, Tabitha proposed, "Let's go up to the peak when we are through here and watch the moon rise."

There was a moment of dead silence in the room. Usually the two inexperienced young housekeepers sought to hustle their restless, boisterous brood into bed as soon as the evening meal had ended and the night's chores were done. What had come over her to suggest such a thing as an evening stroll, or climb, as it would be if they went up to the peak? Susie looked at Tabitha with incredulous eyes, then glanced questioningly at Mercedes, but the older sister was as much mystified as were the rest.

"Do you mean that, or are you joking?" demanded Irene bluntly.

"I mean it," replied Tabitha calmly, though her face flushed uncomfortably under the surprised stare of eight pair of eyes.

"You usually chase us off to bed, you know," said Susie, still wondering what the unexpected proposal meant.

"Well, it is such a lovely night, I thought it would be fun to follow the trail to the top of the mountain, and watch the moon come up."

"And tell stories?" breathed Irene, clasping her hands ecstatically.

"Yes, if you wish," laughed the senior housekeeper.

"And speak pieces!" cried Mercedes, who was never tired of hearing Tabitha recite.

"Perhaps."

"And sing songs," suggested Rosslyn, who loved to listen to Gloriana's rich, sweet voice carolling joyous lays or softly crooning lullabyes.

"Maybe."

"And build a bonfire to roast—" began Billiard, but paused, remembering that it was too early for green corn yet, and not being able to think of anything else roastable.

"Mosquitoes," finished Toady mischievously.

But Tabitha's face clouded anxiously. "I am afraid we'll have to let the bonfire go this time," she said gravely. "There is a law against such things here in Silver Bow. A fire is such a hard thing to fight on the desert, supposing it once gets started; so no one takes any risks."

Toady's face fell and Billiard looked rebellious, seeing which, Tabitha hastily continued, "Some day we will go down to the river——"

"Oh, and have a picnic!" squealed Susie, giving such an eager little hop of anticipation that the cup she was drying flew out of her hand and half-way across the room, falling with a dull thud in a pan of bread sponge which Tabitha had just been mixing.

"My!" breathed Irene enviously, "I wish my dishes would do that! When *I* drop one it always bu'sts."

Her peculiar grievance, coupled with Susie's look of utter amazement at the performance of her cup, caused a merry laugh all around, and the subject of bonfire was speedily forgotten, to Tabitha's unbounded relief.

The dishes were soon washed and piled away in the cupboard, the evening chores completed, and the troop of eager children romped gaily up the rocky trail to the summit of the mountain, on which the Eagles' Nest was built. It was just such a night as Tabitha loved, and she would gladly have sat in silence the whole evening through, watching the barren landscape lying glorified in the white moonlight; but not so with the younger members of the party. To be sure, it was a pretty picture that the old moon revealed to their eyes, but even the most beautiful pictures cannot hold a child's attention long. It is excitement that they desire; so scarcely had the party reached their goal than Inez demanded imperiously, "Now Tabitha, speak something for us."

"Oh, not right away," protested the older girl, glancing wistfully about her at the beauties of the night, and longing for a few moments of solitude that she might enjoy herself in her own peculiar fashion. "Let's watch the moon come up."

"No," clamored the boys, who had heard Tabitha's many talents lauded by their cousins until their curiosity had well-nigh reached the

bursting point. "Speak right away. It's no fun watching the old moon come up! Besides, it's high enough now to make things as plain as day."

"Suppose you recite something first, then," suggested Gloriana, noting the wistfulness in the big, black eyes of her new sister.

"Not on your tin-type!" Billiard emphatically declared. "It's ladies first, you know! We want Tabitha to spiel."

"Well, then, what shall it be?" sighed that young lady resignedly.

"Something with ginger in it," was Toady's prompt reply. "Not a sissy-girl piece."

"About a battle or a prize-fight," suggested Billiard with amusing impartiality.

"*Barbara Fritchie,*" put in eager Irene.

"No, don't," cried Susie. "We've heard that so often. Speak *Sheridan's Ride.*"

"Or *Driving Home the Cows,*" suggested Mercedes. "I think that is so pretty, and it is a war piece, too."

"But it is too sad," promptly vetoed Susie. "We want something—noisy."

"With cannons and guns," seconded the boys.

So Tabitha obligingly recited the thrilling lines:

"'Up from the South at break of day,
Bringing to Winchester fresh dismay,
The affrighted air with a shudder bore,
Like a herald in haste, to the chieftain's door,
The terrible grumble, and rumble, and roar,
Telling the battle was on once more,
And Sheridan twenty miles away.'"

And her thoughts flew back to that black day in the dingy old town hall, when she had declaimed those very lines, and of the dire punishment which had overtaken her; but the sting of it was all gone now, and she found herself smiling at the recollection of that fateful encore. Everything was so different these days. She could afford to forget the old heartaches and longings in the happiness which had come to her during the past year.

"'Here is the steed that saved the day
By carrying Sheridan into the fight,
From Winchester, twenty miles away!'"

she finished; and before the enthusiastic audi-

ence realized that the recitation was ended, she began *Horatius at the Bridge.* Then followed in quick succession all the thrilling war-time pieces at her tongue's command, while the delighted children held their breath in wondering admiration.

Breathless at length, she paused, and surveying the circle of faces about her, said whimsically, "That's a plenty, I reckon. My throat is as dry as the desert!"

"Just one more!" they pleaded eagerly.

"But I have spoken all I can think of now with guns and cannons in them."

"Then give us a different kind," wheedled Irene, in her most persuasive tones.

"That one you spoke May Day at Ivy Hall," suggested Mercedes, "when you tumbled off the platform."

"Tumbled off the platform?" echoed the boys in great surprise. This was an adventure which had never been recounted to them. "How did she tumble off the platform? Tell us about it."

Tabitha merely laughed and shook her head, but Mercedes, elated at the opportunity of singing the praises of her idol, regaled them

with a laughable description of Tabitha's mishap. This led to other boarding school reminiscences,—the christening of the vessel, when Cassandra took her memorable plunge into the ocean; the night of the opera and their experiences with the runaway ostriches; the voice of the mysterious singer in the bell-tower, which some of the more timid students had mistaken for a ghost; and finally, the appearance of the Ivy Hall ghost itself. The McKittrick girls had heard all these events recounted so often that they knew them almost by heart; but, nevertheless, they were never tired of listening, and drank in the stories of all those delightful mishaps with almost as much eagerness as was displayed by Billiard and Toady, hearing them for the first time.

But all frolics come to an end, and Tabitha at length roused with a start to announce, "That clock struck ten, I am positive."

"What clock?"

"Yours. The one in the kitchen. We were unusually quiet, I reckon, for I was able to count ten strokes. We must fly into bed as fast as we can get there. I had no idea it was so late, although Janie and Rosslyn have been

snoozing for ages. Come on, let's march. See who can get to the house first."

Away they scampered as hard as they could run down the rough path, while Tabitha and Glory wrestled with the two little sleepers, trying to rouse them from their slumber so they might walk down to the cottage instead of having to be carried. But Rosslyn refused to waken thoroughly, and created such a scene that it was some minutes before they could coax him to follow them down the trail. So when they entered the moonlit kitchen, leading the stumbling boy and carrying Janie, who could not keep her eyes open or her feet under her, the rest of the family had vanished completely.

"Can they be in bed already?" asked Tabitha in surprise. "Have we been wrestling with those children so long?"

Gloriana tiptoed across the floor and opened the door to the room where the four sisters slept, and disclosed four flushed faces peacefully reposing on their pillows. Mercedes and Irene were already fast asleep, and the other two so near the land of Nod that their eyes merely fluttered open for an instant at the

sound of the opening door, and then drowsily fell again.

Satisfied, Gloriana turned to Tabitha, busy trying to slip Rosslyn's nightgown over his limp body, and whispered, "All serene!"

"Then skip off to bed," said the other girl. "I will bring Janie when I come."

"But——"

"Oh, it is just the bread. I want to knead it down once more. It won't take me half a jiffy, but if I don't do it now, it will be all over the floor by morning."

So Gloriana crept wearily away to her room, for it had been a long, hard, disappointing day, but a moment later she scurried back into the kitchen; and when Tabitha wheeled about in surprise at her hasty entrance, she laughed nervously, half apologetically, "I kicked someone's shoes under the bed! Don't know whether they are my own or a burglar's!"

Knowing how timid the red-haired girl still felt on the desert at night, Tabitha refrained from smiling at what seemed an uncalled-for fright, and said reassuringly, "No burglars ever visit Silver Bow. There is nothing in a miner's shack to tempt them."

"I should think there would be plenty of gold nuggets," answered Gloriana in surprise.

"Not many in Silver Bow houses, I reckon," Tabitha placidly replied. "But if you are afraid to go to bed alone, you better wait for me. I'll be ready in a minute."

She did not mean to speak scornfully, for she sympathized heartily with the sensitive girl, remembering with what horror the desert nights used to fill her when Silver Bow first became her home. But Gloriana thought she detected a hint of ridicule in her companion's voice, and hurriedly departed for their room once more, saying with a great show of bravado, "Oh, I'm not afraid! Come to think of it, I believe I left my slippers at the foot of the bed, and that is probably what I hit."

The door closed behind her again, and Tabitha, smiling sympathetically at the girl's attempt at bravery, began to cover the mound of soft, white dough in the huge pan, when a wild, unearthly shriek echoed through the house, followed by the sharp crack of a pistol, and the muffled fall of a body.

For one brief instant Tabitha stood rooted to the spot, fairly paralyzed with horror.

Then the thought of Glory gave wings to her feet, and, heedless of her own danger, she flew for the scene of disaster, whispering to herself, "Oh, why did I leave the house unlocked all the evening while we were gone?"

As the door of her room swung back on its hinges, the first thing her eyes fell upon was the flickering, smoking, chimneyless lamp standing on the low dresser; and even in her terror she wondered how it chanced that careful Glory had neglected to protect the light properly. The next object that met her gaze was Glory herself, leaning white and limp against the closet door, holding a battered, smoking pistol at arm's length from her.

"Glory, are you hurt?" she gasped.

"No!"

"But the gun—the shot——"

"No one's shot—only the lamp chimney! I aimed at the—the burglars under the bed, and shot off the lamp chimney," she panted, beginning to laugh hysterically, and tightening her grasp on the rusty gun.

"Where is the burglar?" Intrepidly she stooped and peered under the bed, half expect-

ing to see the disturber of their peace still hiding there.

"In the closet,—both of them!"

"*Two?*"

"Yes."

"Oh, Glory!"

"They are locked in. Here is the key."

"I must go for the constable."

A scuffling sound suddenly issued from the closet, and Gloriana cried in terror, "And leave me here alone with them?"

"There is no other way. I'll be gone but a minute. They surely can't get loose in that time!" And she darted from the room without giving Gloriana opportunity for further objections.

Hardly had the sound of her racing footsteps died away in the distance, however, when the red-haired guard, leaning against the door, half dead with fear, was electrified at hearing a muffled voice call through the keyhole, "I say, Glory, let us out, do! We were just a-foolin'. Didn't you know 'twas us? Please don't turn us over to the sheriff!"

"'Twas Tabitha's story about the Ivy Hall ghost that made us think of it," pleaded

Toady. "We ain't sure-enough burglars. We just meant to scare you a little bit."

"And you sure scared *us* enough to make up," coaxed Billiard. "Please let us out before Tabitha gets back. She said she'd write Uncle Hogan the next time we got into trouble."

"And that will mean he will take us away from here," wheedled Toady. "He's awful hard on a fellow."

"You deserve it!" suddenly answered Glory, with a grimness that startled even the girl herself.

"Then you won't let us out?" cried the boys in great dismay.

"I—I haven't decided yet," Gloriana was forced to admit.

"But Tabitha will be back directly."

"Yes, she's a swift runner. I don't think she will be gone long." Glory was beginning to enjoy the strange situation.

"Oh, Glory, don't keep us here, please!" prayed Billiard desperately.

"We'll *never* play burglar again!" promised repentant Toady.

"No, it will be something else the next time," said their jailer heartlessly.

"If you'll just set us free this time, we'll be reg'lar sissy girls all the rest of the summer," they cried.

"You have promised so many times—" Glory began wearily.

"Oh, I can hear her coming!" cried Toady, half frantic at thought of the constable whom Tabitha had gone to summon.

Gloriana thought she could, also, and swiftly turning the key in the lock, she let the quaking prisoners out, urging them on with a violent push as they scurried past her, and hissing in their ears, "Scamper! If you aren't in bed when she gets here, she'll know you did it."

But they needed no urging. Their feet scarcely touched the floor, it seemed to Gloriana, as they made a mad rush for their room; and when Tabitha returned a moment later, alone, they lay tense and breathless under the coverlets of the cot.

"Glory!" they heard her ejaculate. "You let them get away from you!"

"I couldn't help it," replied the red-haired

girl in excited tones. "Couldn't you get anyone? Wasn't the constable at home?"

"No, but he'll investigate as soon as——"

The rest of the sentence was lost in the slamming of a door; but the two culprits lay and quaked with fear long after the rest of the household was fast asleep, little dreaming that as soon as the door was tightly closed so they could no longer distinguish the voices, Glory had wheeled on Tabitha and giggled accusingly, "You knew all the time!"

"Not until I ran past their door and saw their bed was empty," whispered the black-haired girl with her hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter she could no longer suppress.

"What possessed you to keep on, then?"

"I surmised what would happen, and decided to scare *them* a little, too. So I crept around the house and listened to you talking with them. When they thought they heard me coming back, I concluded it was time I did put in appearance again; but I thought I'd die laughing to hear them scuttling into bed. Now I reckon the score is even!"

"Then you won't tell their Uncle this time?"

"I ought to."

"They've had a big punishment already, Puss."

"They deserve it."

"I—I scared them stiff when I shot."

"Poor girlie, and you were as badly scared yourself. My brave Glory!"

"Don't praise me, Kitty. I'm an awful coward. My teeth are chattering yet."

"And you are trembling as if you had the ague. Are you sure you're not hurt? I thought I heard something fall."

"The gun kicked and knocked me over," Gloriana admitted. "That is what gave the boys a chance to scramble into the closet. I didn't know it was Billiard and Toady then, because the bullet splintered the lamp chimney and I couldn't see real well."

"But you locked them in."

"Oh, that was easy! They were holding the door shut with all their might, and the only thing left to do was to turn the key in the lock. I am *so* thankful it was only a prank!"

"So am I," Tabitha admitted grudgingly. "But I can't say I relish that class of pranks."

"Give them another chance, Tabitha. I think they really are trying to be good."

"Well, I'll—see. We'll forget all about it now and go to sleep. Morning can't be very far off."

CHAPTER VII

TOADY AND THE CASTOR BEANS

BUT when morning dawned, Gloriana lay flushed and feverish upon her pillow, her head throbbing until she could scarcely open her eyes. Tabitha was alarmed, and between her worry over the sick girl lying in their darkened room, and her ministrations to croupy Janie, who had caught cold sleeping in the night air on the mountain top, the poor housekeeper was so nearly distracted that she had little time to devote to the rest of her large family, and they wandered about the premises like so many disconsolate chicks who had lost their mother. It was an ideal time to get into mischief, and yet something restrained them.

The girls, it seemed, had slept through all the racket of the previous night, and were not aware that anything out of the ordinary had occurred, but they could not understand the

tense atmosphere; and when Mercedes heroically tried to fill Tabitha's place the other members of the brood resented her authority, frankly found fault with her badly cooked oatmeal and unsalted potatoes, and insulted her attempts at housekeeping in such a heartless, unfeeling manner that she finally dissolved in tears and refused to do anything further toward their comfort. Susie and Inez quarreled over the dishes and had the sulks all day. The boys, still fearful of the consequences of their latest prank, and somewhat remorseful at having frightened Gloriana into a fever, wandered aimlessly away toward town, glad to escape from Tabitha's watchful eye, and greatly relieved to think no mention had been made by anyone of the burglars' visit.

"Guess the girls couldn't have heard the noise last night," ventured Toady, when they had left the house far enough behind to make it impossible for anyone to overhear their conversation.

"The girls?" repeated Billiard blankly, his thoughts on another phase of the situation.

"Mercedes and Susie and the twins, I mean."

"Oh! P'r'aps Tabitha's making 'em keep still."

"Do you think Tabitha knows we did it?" cried Toady in alarm.

"Naw, you ninny! That is, not 'nless Glory's gone and squealed."

"But——"

"I meant she'd prob'ly try to hush them up if they had heard our racket, so's the whole town wouldn't know about the burglars."

"Why? That's just what is worrying me. If she has hushed them up, it's just to make us believe she doesn't suspect. I'll bet the constable will be up there bright and early with his d'tectives, asking all sorts of questions, and everyone in Silver Bow will join in the hunt."

"Then we'll be found out even if Glory doesn't tell."

Toady nodded gloomily.

"It'll go hard with us if the *constable* should find out who did it."

Again Toady nodded.

"We—better—light—out—now."

Toady stopped stock-still in the roadway. "Why?" he demanded.

"Do you want to go to jail?"

"Naw, but they don't put *kids* in jail here. I s'pose likely we'd get a good thrashing——"

"Would you rather stay here and take a whaling than skip while you've got the chance?" cried Billiard, turning pale at the mere thought of such a punishment at the hands of a desert constable, who, somehow, in his imagination, had assumed the proportions and disposition of a monster.

"We—we deserve a sound licking," bravely replied Toady, whose conscience was troubling him sorely.

It was Billiard's turn to halt in the rocky road and stare with unbelieving eyes at his brother, finally finding vent for his feelings by hissing the single word, "Coward!"

"No more coward than you!" Toady denied. "We have been as mean as dirt ever since we came here, and if Tabitha had been as hateful as most girls are, she'd have written Uncle Hogan long ago."

"So you're fishing to get her to write, are you?"

"No, I ain't, but I believe she'd—like it—better—if we told her ourselves, instead of getting found out by someone else."

"Oh! Going to turn goody-goody, are you?" sneered Billiard, not willing to admit that he had been thinking similar thoughts.

Toady bristled. "I hate goody-goodies as bad as you do," he said, with eyes flashing. "But I'm going to own up to my part in last night's racket. We might have scared Glory to death."

"Pooh! You make me sick! Suppose you think she'll let you off easy if you squeal. Well, go ahead, tattler! You will change your mind maybe, when she writes to Uncle Hogan."

"If she wants to write Uncle Hogan, let her write!" screamed the exasperated Toady, stung by his brother's taunts. "I'm going to quit bothering them right here and now; and what's more, I'm going to own up, too."

"Tattler!"

Toady turned on his heel and strode haughtily away, not daring to trust himself to further speech.

"Coward! 'Fraid cat! Sissy girl!" jeered Billiard.

That was the last straw. The younger boy wheeled about and retraced his steps in a slow,

ominous manner. Thrusting his angry face close to Billiard's, and shaking his clenched fist under his nose, he said quietly, "Say that again if you dare, Williard McKittrick!"

Billiard was delighted. He had succeeded in making Toady mad, and now he would have the pleasure of thrashing him. He felt just like pounding someone.

"Coward! 'Fraid cat! Sis——"

A white fist shot out with accurate aim, striking the bully squarely between the eyes. A shower of stars danced merrily about him, blood spurted from his nose, and the next thing he knew, he was stretched flat on the rocky ground, with a grim-faced Toady bending over him.

"Do you take it back?" a menacing voice was asking.

"You—you—" spluttered the angry victim, mopping his streaming nose with his coat sleeve.

"Or do you want some more?" The doubled-up fist drew perilously near the disfigured face in the gravel.

"That's it! Hit a fellow when he's down!"

taunted the fallen bully, still unable to realize just what had happened.

"I shan't hit you while you're down," said Toady calmly but decisively. "I'll let you get onto your pins and then I'll knock them from under you again."

And Billiard, looking up into the determined face above him, knew that it was no idle threat. Toady was in deadly earnest, but still the older boy temporized. It would never do to give in to Toady. If he took such a step as that, his leadership was gone forever. "Aw, come off!" he began, in what he meant to be jocular tones. "Quit your fooling and let me up! I've swallowed a bucket of blood already!"

"Will you take it back, or shall I pummel the stuffing out of you?"

Billiard capitulated. "I take it back," he said sullenly, "but,"— as Toady removed his knees from his chest and allowed him to rise— "I'll get even with you for this."

"All right," responded the younger boy cheerfully. "But don't forget that you will get what's coming to you, too."

"Don't be so sure, sonny! You took me

off guard; you know you did, or you'd never have laid me out. You weren't fair."

Toady, tasting his first victory over his bully brother, and finding it very sweet, suggested casually, "I'll scrap *you* any time you say. Now, if you like."

"My head aches too bad," said the other hastily. "That was a nasty place to fall. It's a wonder it didn't fracture my skull."

Toady looked back at the spot which Billiard had adorned a moment before, and remorse overtook him. "I'm sorry, old chap, if I hurt you," he said contritely. "I wasn't aiming to put you out of business, but you made me so all-fired mad——"

"Aw, forget it! I was just fooling," protested Billiard, shamed by Toady's frank and manly confession. "Say, ain't that the haunted house the girls are always talking about?"

"Which? Maybe 'tis. It's the last one in town, they said. Mercy promised to point it out the next time we climbed the trail behind the house. Do you s'pose it really is haunted?"

"I dunno," Billiard answered indifferently.

Haunted houses in his opinion were things to be avoided. He had merely sought to distract Toady's thoughts from their fistic encounter by mentioning the place. But the younger boy's curiosity was aroused, and as they neared the deserted, unpainted, dilapidated hut, he studied it closely. To him it looked like any other untenanted shack in the mining town, and so he said musingly, "I wonder if that man really did kill himself there, or was he murdered?"

Billiard shivered. "Mercedes said he *died* there. That's all I know."

"She told me he was *found* dead, with all his pockets turned inside out, and——"

"Oh, Toady," interrupted Billiard again, "here's a plant just like those mamma always has in her garden. I didn't s'pose things like that would grow here on the desert."

"That's a castor bean."

"Like they make castor oil of?"

"Sure! At least, I guess so. Glory told me it's the only thing green on the desert that the burros won't eat. Folks could have flowers here the same as back home if water

didn't cost so much, and the burros didn't eat the plants as fast as they came up."

"It's the first castor bean *I've* seen here."

"Why, there's a whole bunch down by the drug-store! We've passed them dozens of times. Where are your eyes?"

Billiard's face flushed wrathfully. Toady's recent victory had made him suddenly very important and domineering, but his fists were certainly hard enough to deal a telling blow; so the older boy, still caressing his swollen, aching nose, thought it wise to overlook such sarcastic flings, and, pretending to be deeply interested in the queer-leaved plant, he casually asked, "Do they all have such funny burrs on them?"

"When they're big enough. That's where the castor beans themselves grow."

Billiard gingerly picked one of the strange balls and minutely examined the hooked prickles of the reddish covering. Then with his jack-knife he proceeded to investigate the inside. "Do you s'pose they really make castor oil out of these? I don't see how they can."

"Glory says they do."

"The insides *smell* something like castor oil, but they don't look at all oily."

"I'll bet they taste oily."

"Stump you to eat one!"

"Huh! It doesn't bother me to take castor oil. I can eat anything!" To prove his boast, he plumped one white bean into his mouth, and chewed it down with apparent relish.

Billiard watched him with eagle eyes to see that he actually did swallow it, then held out another, and Toady obediently munched it. Three, four, five,—bean by bean they disappeared down his throat; but at last he rebelled.

"You hain't tasted one, Billiard McKittrick! How many do you think you are going to feed *me?*"

The brother laughed derisively. "Wanted to see how big a fool you was," he jeered. "Thought you were going to eat all there were on the bush."

Toady made no reply. The beans tasted anything but appetizing, and already the boy was beginning to feel queer.

"Sure you don't want some more?" teased Billiard.

"No. Guess I'll go home."

"And tat—tell about last night?" Billiard remembered all at once the reason they were so far from the Eagles' Nest, and was alarmed lest Toady's threatened confession should involve him also.

"Y-e-s."

"I think you're downright mean, Toady McKittrick!"

"I shan't tell on you."

"Might as well! They will know I was in it."

"And you know you ought to own up, too."

"Cut it out, good—Toady. If you won't tell, I'll not plague them—nor you—any more."

Toady silently plodded on, and in exasperation Billiard caught him by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Le' go!" muttered the boy. "I'm going home, I tell you! Ge' out my way!"

The white misery of that round, freckled face as it turned toward him struck terror to the older brother's heart, and he excitedly demanded, "What's the matter, kid? Are you sick?"

"Feel funny," panted the castor-bean victim. "I—want—to—lie—down."

"Let's hurry then. We'll soon be home." Billiard was genuinely alarmed now, and seizing the other's cold hand, he tried to hasten the lagging steps up the rocky trail. But Toady was really too ill to care what happened or where he went, and he stumbled blindly on, tripping over a loose pebble here, or bruised by staggering into a boulder there, protesting one minute that he could go no further, and the next instant begging Billiard to hurry faster.

At length, however, the house was reached, and Toady drifted like a crumpled leaf across the threshold and lay down in the middle of the floor. Irene had seen them coming, and rushed pell-mell for Tabitha, shrieking in horrified accents, "Kitty, oh, Kitty, they've been to a s'loon and got drunk!"

So Tabitha was somewhat prepared for their dramatic entrance; but one glance at the livid lips, pinched nose and heavy, lusterless eyes would have convinced her that Irene was mistaken, even if Billiard had not caught the words and indignantly denied it. However,

recalling a certain episode in Jerome Vane's life in Silver Bow, she demanded severely, "How many cigarettes has he smoked, Billiard McKittrick?"

"He hain't been smoking at all!" declared that young gentleman, more ruffled at Tabitha's tone than at her accusation. "He—he—I dared him to eat some castor-beans, and I guess they made him sick."

"Castor-beans!" shrieked Tabitha in wild alarm. "Go for the doctor at once. Dr. Hayes at the drug-store! Tell him it's castor-beans. He worked all night to save the Horan children who ate them once."

Billiard had shot out of the door before the words were out of her mouth and was half-way down the trail before the dazed girl awoke with a start to the realization that something must be done at once for the suffering boy on the floor, or it might be too late. "We must make him vomit," she said to red-eyed Mercedes, who had come out of her hiding-place to see what was the cause of all the commotion.

"But how?"

"I don't know myself what emetic would be best. They use mustard and warm water for

some poisons, and—oh, I remember! Bring me that three-cornered, blue bottle from the cupboard, Susie. Hurry! Your mother told me to use plenty of that if any of you got poisoned. Mercedes, light the stove and set on the tea kettle. Inez, get the boy's bed ready, and Irene, bring some clean towels from the closet."

Tabitha had suddenly grown calm again, and as she issued orders to the panic-stricken sisters, she was deftly at work herself, pouring the vile-tasting emetic down poor, unresisting Toady's throat. She worked hard and furiously, fearful that her efforts might fail, and her heart sank within her as she watched the white face grow whiter and listened to the weak moans which escaped his lips with every breath.

Would the doctor never come? The suspense was horrible. When it seemed as if she must scream with frenzy, the five watchers on the door-step shouted wildly, "He's coming, he's coming! Billiard found him and he's got his v'lise!"

Another instant and he was in the kitchen kneeling beside the limp form on the floor,

and working as he questioned. It was over at last, the boy was pronounced out of danger, and Tabitha, weak and trembling, felt her strength suddenly ooze from her limbs.

"Here, here, none of that!" commanded the physician in gruff but kindly tones. "There is no use of fainting now, my girl, when you have done your work so well. But for your efforts before I got here, the chap might have been—well, he can thank his lucky stars that he is in the land of the living."

Perhaps Toady heard, for when Tabitha bent over him a few moments later, the brown eyes fluttered weakly open, and the repentant sinner murmured, "How is Glory?"

"Better. She will be well by morning. But you mustn't talk now."

"Yes, I must, 'cause I made her sick. I burgled—that is, I pretended I was a burglar last night and hid under your bed. I only meant to scare you, though. Honest!"

"Sh! I know all about it. Go to sleep now, Toady." When seeing an unspoken question in his eyes, she answered, "No, Glory didn't give you away. I found it out myself."

"The constable——"

"I never went for him at all. He doesn't know a thing about it."

"Uncle Hogan—I expect you'd better write him. It was awful mean of me, and I'm sorry, but he ought to know."

"Not this time, Toady. I am sure you will not forget again."

A great light of relief crept into the big, brown eyes, and Toady answered with all the vim he could muster, "You are right, I won't."

CHAPTER VIII

BILLIARD RUNS AWAY

BILLIARD, white, scared, remorseful, had crept away up the mountainside the minute he had seen Dr. Hayes bending beside the still form on the kitchen floor, and remained in his retreat, watching the house with frightened eyes, until the physician's bulky figure strode down the path toward town again. Then, flinging himself face down in the gravel, he sobbed in unrestrained relief, until, exhausted by the strain of his recent fearful experience, he fell asleep in the shadow of a ragged boulder, where late that afternoon Tabitha found him, after a vain search about house and yard.

Surprised at having caught a glimpse of this unsuspected side of the bully's character, she beat a hasty retreat, and with the tact of a diplomat, sent one of the younger girls in quest

of him, feeling that he might resent being awakened by her while the trace of tears still showed on his face. Nor was she mistaken in this surmisal, for the instant the boy's eyes unclosed in response to Susie's energetic shaking, he demanded, "Does Tabitha—know where I am?"

"She wouldn't have set the rest of us to hunting if she had, would she?"

"Well, 'tain't necessary for you to tell her I was asleep. The sun was so hot it made my head ache, and I guess it has burned my face to a blister," cautiously touching his puffed, smarting cheeks.

Susie eyed the swollen lids and scarlet visage suspiciously, but for once held her tongue, only announcing briefly as she started on a trot down the trail, "We're waiting supper for you."

"Well, you needn't for I'm not hungry. Tell Tabitha I don't want anything to eat. I am going to bed. My head aches."

"All right," retorted Susie, too cheerfully, he thought with bitterness in his heart, as he followed her nimble feet toward the house. He had hoped she would at least express some

sympathy for his aching head; but what did she care? What did *anyone* care about him? Morosely he shambled along behind his agile cousin; but instead of entering the kitchen, which was of necessity also the dining-room, he chose the front door, and quietly sought the room where he and his brother slept.

Toady's pale face on the pillow made him pause on the threshold, while a twinge of remorse tugged at his heart, but the victim, hearing the creak of the opening door, opened his round eyes, and smiling beatifically, asked in a weak voice, "Seen Tabitha?"

Billiard grunted an unintelligible reply.

"Tell you what, she's a crackerjack!" continued the invalid. Then, as Billiard's only answer was a vicious jerk which divested him of collar and waist at a single effort, Toady cried in surprise, "Why, Bill, have you had your supper?"

"Don't want any!" growled the other, tugging savagely at his boots.

"What's the matter? Sick?"

"Headache!"

"*You* didn't eat any castor-beans, did you?"

Billiard paused in the act of crawling into bed to glare angrily at his brother, thinking he was being made fun of; but Toady's cherubic face seemed to allay his suspicions, and he briefly, but savagely replied, "Naw!"

"You better tell Tabitha—" began Toady in genuine solicitude; but Billiard again misconstrued his brother's meaning, and interrupted, "Aw, shut up! Let a feller alone for once, can't you?" And as Billiard wriggled into bed, puzzled Toady lapsed into silence.

Tabitha, too, was puzzled by the older boy's actions. She had hoped that the poisoning of his brother would awake his better nature if nothing else would, so she was keenly disappointed, as well as surprised, at the change which now took place in him.

"It seems so strange," she confided to Gloriana. "He acted so terribly cut up the day he brought Toady home sick, that I thought it would cure him of his mean mischief, at least. But now he seems bent on trying to find the limit of human endurance—doubling his mischief and being more aggravatingly hateful than ever."

"Perhaps he is getting even for Toady's

reform," suggested the red-haired girl, looking worried.

"Toady—bless the boy!" exclaimed Tabitha fervently. "I should go wild if he had taken the streak Billiard has."

"And yet I can see how provoking it must be to Bill——"

"Why, Gloriana!"

"I mean that Toady's declaration of independence would naturally rouse Bill's 'mad,' as Rosslyn says, when Toady had blindly followed his leadership for so long. And besides, the way Toady flaunts his virtues in his brother's face——"

"That *is* rather amusing, isn't it?"

"Provoking? I should say! Billiard has been used to saying the word and Toady has obeyed. It's rather a—a—jar, to be defied, or ignored all of a sudden. Bill is bright——"

"Too bright," sighed Tabitha, somewhat sarcastically, Gloriana thought.

"He *is* bright!" championed the younger girl warmly. "This morning I happened to overhear him teasing the girls at play under the kitchen window, and he declared that it was a mistake for Inez and Irene to be twins;

that it should have been Susie and Inez, and then their names would have been Suez and Inez."

Tabitha smiled in spite of herself, then said heatedly, "But he is so mean about it! To-day while you were at the bakery and he thought I had gone for the mail, I heard a commotion in the yard, and what do you suppose I found him doing?"

Gloriana shook her head.

"He had the girls and Rosslyn lined up by the woodpile and was making them carry in *his* wood. Even little Janie was loaded down with two immense sticks, so heavy she could hardly toddle with them."

"What did you do?"

"Made them drop their loads right where they were, and he had to carry it all in by himself."

"Without even Toady's help?"

"All by himself!" repeated Tabitha emphatically.

"I am afraid—we are not apt—to——"

"To what?" asked Tabitha, as her companion stammered in confusion and paused abruptly.

"To gain anything—*much* of anything by trying to force Billiard into being good."

"How *are* we to make him mind, then? He won't coax. You can't flatter him into behaving himself, and threats don't do a mite of good. *I* think a smart dose of the hickory stick would be the most effective medicine for such cases as his."

Glory looked dubious.

"You don't agree with me?" suggested Tabitha.

"He is such a big boy to be thrashed," she evaded.

"He is such a big boy to act that way!"

"Yes, that's true, but——"

How she would have finished her sentence Tabitha never found out, for at that moment a piercing scream broke the stillness of the desert afternoon, followed by a medley of excited accusations, denials, threats, and Billiard's taunting laugh. Tabitha flew to the rescue of her brood and found Irene stretched full length in the gravel, with Mercedes and Toady deluging her with water, while the rest of the sisters danced frantically about the trio.

"He—he shot her!" cried Rosslyn indig-

nantly, at sight of the slender figure in the doorway.

"I gave her fair warning," said defiant Billiard.

"Hand me your gun!" demanded Tabitha in exasperation, after a hasty examination of the victim had convinced her that Irene was more frightened than hurt.

"Gun! Ha, ha, ain't that rich?" mocked Billiard.

"'Twas a slingshot," volunteered Toady.

"And he shooted a rock," added Janie.

Tabitha held out her hand with an imperious gesture. "Pass it over quietly, or I shall make you."

Billiard calmly pocketed the article in dispute, and seeing that Irene was recovering under the heroic treatment of her amateur nurses, he seated himself in tantalizing silence upon the saw-horse, as if to enjoy the scene he had created. But his enjoyment was short lived. Tabitha, now thoroughly aroused, and forgetful of her dignity, swooped down upon the tormentor, wrested his slingshot from his grasp, and before anyone could divine her intentions, seized a barrel stave from the wood-

pile and gave the surprised boy a sound drubbing.

In the midst of the thrashing, there came vividly to her mind her childish horror of that day of reckoning with her father, when he had struck her with one of his slippers, and she recalled the fact that it was not the physical hurt, but the humiliation of the blow which had wounded her most deeply. Flinging down the stick, she released the struggling lad as suddenly as she had seized him; and in tones that sounded husky in spite of herself, briefly ordered, "Go to your room!"

Angry, stunned, shamed, Billiard bounced through the kitchen, slammed the door of his room, turned the key in the lock and—stood still in the middle of the floor. Whipped by a girl not four years his senior! Whipped by a *girl!* It was an unforgivable outrage. He would get even for that. But what was he to do? Would *could* he do? She had beaten him at every turn, she had set Toady against him, she had made him the laughing stock of his cousins. He—he—he would do something desperate. He would——

As if in answer to his thoughts, he heard a

strange voice close beside the open window say, "Yes, he has run away. The inspector completed his job this morning, found Atwater's accounts five hundred dollars short, and he skipped."

"Who?" demanded Mercedes. "The postmaster?"

"Yep! Lit out. Can't have been gone more'n an hour, but no one seems to have seen him anywhere around town, and they are scouring the country for him."

Billiard drew a deep breath. That was an idea. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He, too, would run away. Stealthily he crept to the little closet, selected a clean shirt, a pair of stockings, a necktie, and his pajamas, tied them up in a bath-towel, not having such a thing in his wardrobe as a bandana handkerchief, although he felt that this was an essential; and after a cautious survey of the premises to make sure that the children were nowhere near, he crawled out of the window, carefully shut the screen again, and darted swiftly down the steep, pathless incline on the west side of the house to the flat below. It was a hazardous undertaking, and at any

other time he would have shrunk from attempting it, but in his unreasonable anger and desire for revenge, all else was forgotten; and he arrived at the sandy bottom breathless, badly scratched by the mesquite, and smarting from the prick of cactus thorns, but triumphant.

Pausing only long enough to shake his fist defiantly at the house on the cliff above, he made off across the desert as fast as his legs would carry him. His first idea had been to follow the railroad, but on second thought he concluded that he might easily be overtaken and brought back if he took that course. So after a brief survey of the pathless landscape, he decided to skirt the mountains in whose hollow lay the town of Silver Bow, and to strike off to the west, in the direction of a neighboring mining camp called Crystal City.

"If I *should* miss that place," he reasoned to himself, "I am sure to get somewhere. Perhaps to Los Angeles that Mercy goes so crazy about. Say, that's just the thing! It takes only about twelve hours to get there by train; I ought to be able to walk it in two days,

and I'll join the navy. I always did want to be a sailor!"

So he trudged sturdily on through the heavy sand of the flats, building air castles and nursing his wrath, but paying little heed to the course he was taking, until with a shiver of alarm he discovered that the afternon sun had set and the range of white-capped mountains which sheltered Crystal City was seemingly no nearer than when he had set out. He began to feel faint with hunger and thirst, and was appalled to think he had forgotten in his flight to pack any lunch in his small store of belongings, and was now what seemed miles from civilization, in the midst of the pathless desert with neither food nor drink, and night coming on.

Night! He shuddered. How could he have forgotten the night part of it? Where was he to stay? He was afraid of the desert darkness. Somehow, it always seemed blacker and stiller there than anywhere else on earth. But perhaps the moon would come up. That would be lots of company, and the weather was so warm that he would really enjoy sleeping out in the open air. Eagerly he scanned

the evening sky, and perceiving that the east appeared to be growing lighter, his spirits began to rise. After all, he was not sorry he had run away. Wouldn't there be consternation in the Eagles' Nest when his absence was discovered? How Tabitha would regret her unwarranted harshness! And Toady—Toady would cry and snivel because he had deserted his dear, big brother in his hour of need. And searching parties would be sent all over the country to find him. How he gloated over the pictures his vivid imagination had drawn!

But all the while he stumbled on, it was growing darker, the landscape had become an indistinct blur, and night sounds filled the air. The lonely howl of a wolf in the distance sent a chill of fear down Billiard's spine; the scream of a night-hawk overhead made him jump almost out of his shoes, and he was just beginning to consider where he should lie down to sleep when a sudden scurry in the underbrush froze him in his tracks. The next minute, however, he laughed at his fright, for it was merely a mother burro and her baby colt which his steps had routed from their hiding-place and sent flying across the flats for safety. A

twig snapping sharply under his feet startled him; what sounded like a warning hiss close by brought his heart into his mouth; and trembling from head to foot he paused by a clump of Spanish bayonets, uncertain what to do next.

Oh, if only he had not run away! If only he were sitting with the rest of the lively troop of children around the supper table! Or perhaps it was too late for supper now. More likely they would be preparing for bed. What frolics they had enjoyed in the evenings when Tabitha made taffy and recited stirring ballads to fill in the moments while the toothsome sweet was cooking. What exciting tales his cousins told of the brave, black-haired maid whom he was trying so hard to hate. He did hate her! That is, sometimes he did. But he could not help admiring her pluck, even though he stood in awe of the fierce temper that blazed up so quickly, and as quickly died away again. She was certainly a wonder for a girl. There was no 'fraid cat about her. He wished she liked him better. But how could she, when he was so tantalizing, mean and sly? Perhaps if he went back home, that is, to Aunt——

"Hands up! We've got you at last!" growled a stern voice almost in his ear, it seemed; and poor Billiard's hands shot high into the air, he shut his eyes, held his breath and waited for the end. But to his utter amazement, a second voice huskily replied, after an instant, "Yes, you've got me, boys. I knew it was no use to run away, but—I—couldn't bear—to stay—and know that everyone looked at me as a thief. I never took the money."

The moon, which had seemed so slow in rising, had finally mounted to the crest of the surrounding hills, and poured a stream of mellow light upon the waste below. Billiard, his hands still thrust stiffly above his head, now distinguished a few feet in front of him the dark shapes of a dozen or more men, armed with revolvers, clustering around one whom he recognized as Atwater, the runaway postmaster of Silver Bow.

"That's all right, Atwater," growled the first speaker, who was evidently leader of the posse. "Tell your tale in court, but be a man and face the music. Fall in, boys!"

For a long time, Billiard watched them as

they marched their hapless prisoner back to town, and the leader's words kept ringing in his ears, "Be a man and face the music!" Suddenly a new thought flashed through his brain. Why had he not followed them? It wasn't too late yet. He could still see their forms indistinctly moving across the desert, and by following their lead, would sooner or later reach Silver Bow himself. Stepping out from the clump of Spanish bayonets which had formed his retreat, he set out on a dog-trot in the direction the men had taken, and after a long, rough, weary journey, actually found himself trailing up the familiar path to the Eagles' Nest.

He paused as he reached the children's play house and took a furtive survey of the place. One lone light burned in the low cottage. Probably Tabitha had missed him and was waiting for his return. Supposing she should lick him again for running away?

"Billiard!"

'Twas only a whisper from a rock nearby, but the boy almost screamed aloud in his fright at the unexpectedness of it.

"Sh!" the voice continued. "It's only

I,—Glory. I had to go to the drug-store for some alum,—Janie has the croup,—and I saw you coming up the trail. Tabitha hasn't missed you yet. She has been so anxious over the baby. So sneak back to your room and I'll bring you something to eat as soon as I can. Run now! Tabitha will be expecting me."

"But Glory, doesn't *anyone* know I—" began bewildered Billiard, much taken back at his reception.

"Ran away?" finished Gloriana. "No one but Toady and myself. He won't tell. I made him promise. Of course we'd have had to, if you hadn't come back, but I knew—I thought you would—" How could she tell him that she knew he was too much of a coward to persist in running away? "Scramble into your room as quietly as possible," she continued, "so as not to disturb the others, and I will bring you some supper in a minute or so."

"You're—you're awfully good to a feller," mumbled the abashed boy, wondering how he ever could have disliked the red-haired Glory. "I—I'll not forget it." And as the girl hur-

ried up the path to the kitchen door, he skirted the house till he reached the window of his room, through which he wriggled cautiously and disappeared in the friendly darkness within, thankful that he was home again.

CHAPTER IX

BILLIARD SURRENDERS

TOADY kept his promise not to mention Billiard's runaway expedition to anyone else save Gloriana; but being human, he could not keep from twitting his brother occasionally, and the days which followed that memorable night were full of misery for the unhappy boy. His cousins avoided him, Tabitha ignored him, Toady tormented him, and even Gloriana seemed indifferent to his plight. In his fright at discovering himself lost on the desert at night, he had resolved to follow Toady's example and turn over a new leaf. He could not quite make up his mind to confess his sins to eagle-eyed Tabitha, but was really sincere in his desire to do better; and was as surprised as he was disappointed to find that no one paid any attention to the sudden change in his deportment.

"Might as well have kept on being bad," he

growled with an injured air one afternoon when a fortnight had passed without any noticeable change in the atmosphere. "Wish I hadn't come back that night. Guess they'd have sung a different tune *then!* Maybe a coyote would have got me, or I'd have stepped into a rattlesnake's nest and been stung to death. Bet they'd have felt sorry when they found me—," he hesitated. His picture was too vivid, and he shuddered as he thought what a fate would have been his had a rattlesnake bitten him as he tramped across the pathless waste in his flight. "Pretty near dead," he finished finally, unable to endure the thought that they *might* have found him dead.

"If I had kept on, I'd be in Los Angeles now,—maybe in the navy already. I've a good notion to try again. I could almost go by train, now that my 'lowance has come. Mercy says it takes twelve dollars, and I've got ten. 'T any rate, I could ride as far as that would take me, and—by George, I b'lieve I could beat my way without spending a cent! That's the way tramps travel from city to city."

He winced at the idea of being classed with tramps, and fell to debating whether he would

buy a ticket and ride like a gentleman as far as his ten dollars would carry him, or whether he would attempt the hobo's hazardous method of transportation. Before he had arrived at any satisfactory conclusion, he heard the tramp of feet close by, and the lively chatter of voices, and around the bend of the path came Toady with his six cousins. They did not see him at first, half hidden as he was by the heap of ragged rocks on which he lay stretched full length, but even when they did become aware of his presence, they merely glanced indifferently at the lazy figure and passed by without speaking.

Angered at thus being ignored and left out in the cold, Billiard resolved to display no interest in them, either, although he was consumed with curiosity as to where they were bound; but a chance remark of Susie's about being lowered in a bucket overcame his resolve, and he called after them, "Where you going, kids?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" Inez flung back with a saucy toss of her head.

"Up Pike's Peak," said Toady, without so much as looking back.

"You mean down Ali Baba's cave," suggested Mercedes laughingly.

"Shall we tell him?" asked Irene, relenting as she glanced back at the lonely figure on the rocks.

"He'll just be bad if we let him come," warned Susie.

"He hasn't been bad for a long time," gentle Irene reminded them.

"Aw, what do you s'pose I care where you are going?" sung out Billiard, more hurt by their manner than he cared to acknowledge. "Keep on to Jericho, if you want to."

"We ain't going to Jericho," said Irene, lagging uncertainly behind the others. "Only just across town to that hill over there where is a—a 'bandoned mine. Toady's never seen what one looks like, so we're taking him along to get a peek at it. Have you ever seen a mine?"

Billiard shook his head.

"Tabitha says if we're real good, she'll see if the superintendent won't take us all through the Silver Legion mine before the summer is over; but to-day we're just going to show Toady how the miners go up and down the

shaft. He won't b'lieve they use a bucket. Don't you want to come too?"

"Nope, guess not," Billiard answered promptly, though the wistful look in his eyes belied his words.

"It's int'resting," urged Irene, who somehow seemed to understand that Billiard did not really mean what he said.

"Is it a real bucket?" he could not refrain from asking.

"Yes."

"Like a water bucket?"

"Yes, only bigger."

"I sh'd think the miners would fall out."

"Oh, it's big enough so they can't tumble if they mind the rules; but you've got to keep your head down inside, or you'll be killed by the big beans—" she meant beams—"which are built in to hold the dirt from caving in and filling up the mine. Come and see for yourself."

"Well, p'r'aps I will." With a great show of indifference, the boy uncoiled his legs, slid to the ground beside Irene, and hurried with her after the others, now a considerable distance in advance; but the little group had

reached their goal and were gingerly peering into the black depths of the abandoned shaft when Billiard and Irene joined them.

"Ugh!" shuddered Mercedes, drawing back with a shiver from the yawning mouth of the hole. "It smells like lizards. I'll bet the bottom of the shaft is full of them."

"It didn't use to be," remarked Susie, dropping a pebble over the brink and listening to the hollow echoes it awoke as it bounded from timber to timber.

"Were you ever down there?" asked Toady in surprise.

"No, but papa was one of the men here when the mine was working."

"What did it quit working for?" ventured Billiard, testing the weather-stained rope still coiled about the winch above the shaft.

"The vein of rich silver stopped all of a sudden and they couldn't make the other ore pay, so they shut down, and the men went to work in other mines, or else moved away."

"How deep is a shaft?" asked Toady, as Susie sent another pebble spinning after the first and counted rapidly until it struck the bottom.

"Some are *hundreds* of feet deep," replied Mercedes impressively, glad of a chance to air her meagre knowledge of mining affairs. "But this——"

"Is only a hole," finished Inez contemptuously.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Billiard, mystified. "Ain't this a sure-enough shaft?"

"Oh, yes," Mercedes hastened to inform him; "only 'tisn't the main one. That's all boarded up, and no one can go down it any more. This was dug later. Someone thought there was more silver here, and they made this shaft. It's not very deep——"

"Let's go down it!" proposed Billiard, boyishly eager for such an adventure.

"Oh, horrors!" shrieked Mercedes. "With all those lizards down there?"

"Shucks! Lizards won't hurt a fellow."

"Maybe there are snakes, too," said Rosslyn, hastily backing away from the place.

"We'd have heard them," Billiard answered promptly. "Susie has fired enough rocks at 'em to stir 'em up if there was any there."

"But Tabitha mightn't like it," suggested Irene in troubled tones.

"Did she ever say you *couldn't* go?"

"N-o."

"Or did your mother?"

"N-o."

"Then what's to hinder?"

"S'posing the rope should bu'st," mused Irene aloud.

"*That* rope? Why, it's half as big as my arm! Yes, bigger."

"But it has been here a long, long time. Ever since I can remember. Doesn't rope rot?"

"I'll bet that's as strong as iron," boasted Billiard. "There's nothing rotten about *it*. I'll stump any of you to go down with me."

"Will you go first and see if there are any snakes?" demanded Susie, whose love of adventure was constantly leading her into mischief.

"If you'll promise honor bright to come next."

"I will," Susie rashly promised, her eyes dancing with excitement and eagerness. "Will you go, too, Toady?"

"Sure, but who's going to let us down? I'll bet it takes some work to keep the rope unwinding just right."

"I'll lower you all," proposed Mercedes magnanimously, for the idea of descending into that black, musty hole did not appeal to her in the least, but she could not bear to appear less brave than fly-away Susie.

"You! Pooh! You are just a girl! The bucket would get away from you the first thing, and then where'd the rest of us be? No, I've got a better plan than that. You and Toady and Irene let Susie and Inez and me down first; and after we have had a look at the thing, we'll come up and let you down. How does that suit you?"

"It's a go," Toady readily responded.

"All right," quavered Mercedes.

But Irene held her peace. Nothing could tempt her to crouch in that great, swaying bucket and be dropped into the blackness of that yawning pit, but she did not mean to voice her opinions until the proper moment. So she took her place beside Mercedes and Toady and puffed and panted as the rope slowly unwound, and Billiard, scrooched low

in the bucket, disappeared from view. It was hard work and slow, to pay out the rope evenly, but Billiard did not seem at all inclined to be critical, and accepted his rough, jolting descent without a murmur. Had the truth been known, the boy was too nearly paralyzed with fright to notice anything of his surroundings, and more than once he was on the point of signalling for his companions to hoist him to the surface again, but fear of ridicule kept him tongue-tied until it was too late.

With a final jerk and jolt, the bucket stood still, and cautiously opening his eyes for the first time since he had stepped into his queer elevator, Billiard beheld a row of black, shadowy heads hovering over the brink of the aperture, and heard Toady's voice, sounding strangely muffled and far away, call cheerfully, "Well, you've struck bottom, old boy! What does it look like?"

Bottom? Billiard blinked and rubbed his eyes, and peered about him in surprise; but at first in the semi-darkness, he could distinguish nothing. Then as he grew more accustomed to the blackness, he could see before him the mouth of a still blacker cavern, which to his

vivid imagination seemed yawning to swallow him up; and he shudderingly shrank back into the friendly protection of the bucket.

"Why don't you answer?" demanded an impatient voice from above.

"*Are* there snakes and lizards?" called Mercedes.

Snakes! Lizards! Billiard had forgotten them, but with a sigh of relief he realized that there was not a sound of anything stirring about him. "Naw!" he yelled back, trying to make his voice sound brave and scornful. "Guess not. I can't see a thing. Might as well haul me up, 'cause no one could tell what a mine looks like in this blackness."

"Got any matches?" inquired Toady.

Billiard rapidly felt through his pockets. "One," he announced.

"Then here's a candle. Catch it!"

Toady let it drop almost before the words were out of his mouth, and with a tremendous thump it struck poor Billiard on the head before he had caught the significance of the directions from above; and with a yelp of surprise and pain, he tumbled out of the bucket against a timber, which shivered and splintered

under his weight. But in some mysterious manner, he found himself in possession of the candle when he had righted himself once more and brushed the rotten wood from his eyes and mouth. He lost no time in striking his one lone match and lighting the slender taper in his hand, much to the relief of the group hovering anxiously about the shaft.

"There!" he heard Susie ejaculate. "I was sure he had killed himself."

"You mean that Toady did," spluttered the indignant Billiard. "What do you think my head is made of—iron?"

"*I* couldn't tell that it would hit you on the the head, could I?" protested the younger boy apologetically. "Why didn't you dodge?"

"Dodge? D'ye think I'm a cat with eyes that see in the dark?"

"Never mind," soothed Irene, who had ventured near enough the curbing to take an occasional peep down into the blackness. "It's too bad it hurt you. Put some cold water on the bump——"

A derisive shout from her sisters stopped her, and even Billiard had to smile, though he

felt grateful toward the little twin who was sorry he was hurt. By this time the pale candle flame had ceased to sputter and flicker uncertainly, but burned with a steady light, and with a thrill of exultation Billiard looked curiously about him, relieved to find no snakes or crawly things in the abandoned shaft, and pleased beyond measure to think he had actually braved the terrors of the dark to explore this mysterious place, so he could crow over his brother and cousins because of his courage.

"Say, but it's great down here," he called, venturing just inside the timbered cross-cut and staring at the rocky walls which here and there glistened alluringly. "And there's pecks of silver sticking out of every stone. Why don't you come on down, Toady?"

"Can't till you come up. It's Susie and Inez now. Going, girls?"

"You bet!" cried Susie enthusiastically. "Pull up the bucket and help me in."

Eagerly they turned the creaking old windlass and Susie descended to join Billiard in his underground explorations. Being much lighter than her cousin, it was easier to lower

her down the shaft; and still easier with Inez in the bucket; but once the trio were safely at the bottom, the little group above became all impatience for their turn. Mercy's courage had returned as she saw how simple an operation it was to let down the loaded bucket, and even Irene began to feel a desire to explore the mysteries of the abandoned mine with the rest of her mates. Only Rosslyn and Janie hung back, but no one cared. In fact, it simplified matters not to have to bother with such little tads; but it was a nuisance to have Billiard linger so long when he knew the others were just dying to go down.

At last Toady could resist temptation no longer. "I'm going, too," he announced with determination.

"Before Billiard comes up?"

He nodded grimly.

"But s'posing you're too heavy for just Irene and me," suggested Mercedes.

"I shall slide down the rope. I'd rather do that than have you drop me or let the rope out too fast."

"But—how can you?" Mercedes demurred.

"It's so far down there," said Irene.

"Aw, in gym work at school we slide down poles and bars and all sorts of things. It oughtn't to be any harder with a rope. I'm going to try, anyway."

Silently but enviously, the girls watched him spit on his palms, test the rope, and finally let himself slowly down into the shaft, with legs wrapped tightly about his slender, swaying support, and hands grasping the rough strands with a desperate grip, for, too late, he realized what a horrible fate would be his if he should fall; but when he would have gone back, he could not.

"How in the world will we ever get them up?" whispered Irene wonderingly; but before Mercedes could frame a reply, there was a crash from below, a cry, a grating sound of falling rock and then hideous, horrible silence.

"Toady!" shrieked the girls in frenzy, "did you fall?"

"No," came back a muffled answer. "I'm all right, but we have knocked down some boards and can't get out."

"Can't get out!" they repeated dully.

"No. Run for help! Our candle has gone out and it's as black as pitch in here."

"Who'll I go for?" wailed panic-stricken Mercedes, while Irene danced frantically around the shaft and wrung her hands as she chanted, "They'll smother, they'll smother, they'll smother!"

"Anyone, but hustle up!" yelled Toady impatiently, for his companions in the disaster had uttered not a sound since their first wild scream, and a horrible fear that they were hurt or even killed gripped his heart.

However, little Rosslyn was already halfway down the mountain, fairly skimming over the rocks and rubbish, and almost before the distracted girls had recovered their senses enough to be of any aid to the prisoners, the little fellow stumbled across the threshold of the Eagles' Nest, gasping, "They've caved in —Bill and Toady and the girls. I guess maybe they're dead by now!"

Tabitha was on her feet in an instant and the pan of potatoes which she was peeling went spinning across the floor. "Where, Rosslyn?"

Mutely he pointed, too spent for words; and the girl, remembering the old, unprotected shaft of the abandoned Selfridge mine,

flew to the rescue of her brood, pausing only to snatch a lantern from a peg on the wall, and a handful of matches from the pantry shelf.

Mercedes had disappeared when she reached the spot of the accident, but Irene was tugging desperately at the huge windlass, slowly winding up the heavy bucket, moaning all the while in a distracted undertone, while tears of fright trickled down her dirty face. So busy was she that she never heard the patter of Tabitha's feet behind her, and the first intimation she had of help at hand was when the older girl jerked her back from the mouth of the shaft, released the half-raised bucket, and sent it hurtling back into the pit once more.

"Go for the assayer," she commanded hoarsely, seizing the heavy rope with both hands, and preparing to descend as Toady had done. "Run, hurry! And then get Dr. Hayes. We may need him."

The windlass creaked and groaned, the rope swayed and strained, as Tabitha slid out of sight, while Irene raced madly away to do her bidding. Unmindful of bumps or bruises, and almost unaware that her hands were cruelly

burned and torn from her too rapid descent, the black-eyed girl had scarcely touched the bottom of the shaft before she had her lantern lighted and was digging like mad at the fallen rock and debris which almost completely blocked the entrance of the narrow cross-cut.

"Who is it?" called a voice from behind the barrier.

"Thank God!" breathed Tabitha, working with renewed fury. "That you, Toady?"

"Bet you!" came the cheering response.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nope!"

"Where are the others?"

"Here!"

"Safe?"

"I—don't know. I can feel 'em, but they don't answer."

At that instant, without any warning, one of the fallen timbers slipped from its position, and revealed a narrow aperture into the cross-cut, through which Tabitha caught a glimpse of Toady's white face and the gleam of Susie's scarlet dress.

"Can you crawl through?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Carefully now, so as not to start another landslide. There! Now, can you help me make the opening bigger?"

But other aid was at hand. The assayer with three men from the town had arrived and the rescue of the quintette at the bottom of the shaft was speedily effected.

"Are they—" Tabitha's voice faltered as she stood at last on the rocky mountainside and looked down into the still, white faces of Billiard, Susie and Inez. How could she ever have let them out of her sight? How could she ever break the news to the mother?

"Merely stunned," replied the doctor, examining the victims with rapid, practised fingers. "See, the girls are coming to their senses. It's nothing short of a miracle that—Hello, Susie, what did you say?"

"It wasn't gold at all," murmured the child faintly; "just quartz, but he wouldn't b'lieve it."

Billiard opened his eyes slowly. "She says gold don't look like gold in a mine, but I got a pocketful of—" His sentence ended in a groan of pain, and the hand he was trying to thrust into his trousers fell limply at his side.

"Aha!" cried the doctor. "Let's see what we have here."

"A break?" questioned the assayer.

"Bad sprain, I think, but it will keep the young man out of mischief for one while. Are your legs all right? Then I reckon we better move on to town."

So it happened that no serious results came from their latest prank, but Tabitha, in her thankfulness that all her brood was safe and sound, fell into a fit of bitter weeping as soon as the children were back in the Eagles' Nest once more and the rescuers had departed.

"Don't," begged Janie tearfully. "I loves 'oo! I was dood!"

"Please don't," pleaded the other sisters in great distress. "We'll never do it again."

"It was all my fault," cried Toady contritely. "I'm ever so sorry."

"It was not," muttered Billiard, wincing with the pain in his arm, but truly repentant. "I dared 'em to go. Honest, Tabby, *I* was to blame! Will you—will you—er—forgive me? I'm horribly—sorry. Won't you try me again?"

So sincere was his tone, so straightforward

his confession, so manly his bearing, that Tabitha could not fail to be convinced of his earnestness of purpose, and drying her eyes, she took Billiard's proffered hand in a hearty grasp, saying with quivering, smiling lips, "Let's *all* try each other again."

"Let's!" cried the rest of the brood; and they meant it, every one.

CHAPTER X

SUSANNE ENTERTAINS A CALLER

"LET's make some candy. It's too hot to play."

Susie and the twins were sitting idly on a great, shaggy, redwood log in the scanty shade of the house, fanning themselves as briskly as their tired arms would move, and longing for the cool of sundown.

Irene looked startled at the older sister's suggestion, and began, "Tabitha——"

"Oh, I know she made us promise not to get into mischief," Susie impatiently interrupted her, "but taffy ain't mischief. We'll make a big batch so's there will be plenty for the others when they get back."

"It's so hot," objected Inez, as Susie turned to her for approval.

"We'll use the gasolene stove."

"But you've never lighted it. How'll you——"

"Oh, Irene, you make me tired! Don't you s'pose I know how? Haven't I watched mamma and Tabitha hundreds of times? Guess I can manage it if Mercy can. Come on, Inez!"

"Do you know how to make taffy?" questioned the undaunted Irene, following the other two into the sweltering kitchen.

"Course! Molasses and sugar and vinegar and butter. Ask me something hard."

"Tabitha measures 'em."

"So shall I. You go fetch the m'lasses jug and a cup. Inez, bring the vinegar and butter, and I'll measure things after I get the stove a-going." Mopping her face and bustling energetically about the small room, Susie marshalled her forces and set to work with contagious enthusiasm. All three donned huge aprons, hunted up long-handled spoons, and rattled among the neat array of pots and pans until it sounded as if a whole regiment had been turned loose in the kitchen.

The stove was lighted without any trouble, much to the relief of the breathless trio, and the candy making was soon in progress. Sugar was measured and molasses spilled with

reckless abandon over table, floor and stove, in their hurry to get their delectable sweet on cooking before the rest of the family should return from their day's outing and interfere, for, secretly, each be-aproned girl, paddling in the pot with her sticky spoon and dribbling syrup wherever she ran, felt that she was not strictly obeying Tabitha's parting injunction, and was anxious to have a peace offering ready when she returned with the rest of her brood.

They had gone for a drive to the river, and as there was not room in the light wagon for all the large family, Susie and the twins had been bribed to remain at home with the promise of ice-cream sodas at the little drug-store. However, that unusual treat had disappeared long ago down the three eager throats, and they had begun to rue their bargain when Susie's inspiration fired them with enthusiasm once more.

"I wish we had some nuts," panted perspiring Inez, stirring the bubbling mess in the kettle so vigorously that a great spatter flew up and struck Irene on the hand.

"Ooo!" screeched the unfortunate victim. "What made you do that?"

"I didn't do it a-purpose," indignantly denied her twin. "Stop your jumping and suck it off."

Irene obediently thrust the smarting wound into her mouth, and immediately let out another howl of anguish, for the sticky mass had burned the little tongue sadly, and the tears rained down the rosy cheeks unchecked while the dismayed sisters racked their brains for some soothing remedy to deaden the pain.

"Try this," suggested Susie, hurrying out of the pantry with a can of baking powder in her hand, vaguely recalling that some kind of white powder used in cooking was good for burns.

"I will not," sobbed Irene angrily. "You don't know what it will do. You're just guessing."

"Gloriana put coal oil on Toady's foot," timidly began Inez, half distracted at having been the cause of all her sister's woe.

"And you think I'll stick my *tongue* in *that?*" roared the usually gentle twin so savagely that both her companions fell silent, perplexed at the unhappy situation.

Meanwhile the bubbling syrup had been for-

gotten, and with an ominous hiss and a pungent odor, the seething mass boiled over the top of the kettle and was promptly licked up by the eager flames of the stove. A great cloud of smoke filled the kitchen, and the paralyzed girls awoke to their danger with a sickening horror.

"Oh, oh, oh!" they screamed in frenzy. "The house will catch! We'll all be burned up! What will mamma say?"

"Hush! Shut up! Give me your apron!" commanded an authoritative voice behind them, and a big, shabby stranger rushed past them, snatched Susie's apron, gave a deft twist to the flaming burner, seized the smoking kettle, and vanished through the kitchen door before any of the sisters realized what had happened. He was soon back with the blackened pot in his hands and a reassuring smile on his lips. "It's all right, kids," he announced cheerily, noting the terror in their faces. "No harm's done. It won't take but a few minutes to clean up that stove and pan and no one will be the wiser. You are housekeeping by yourselves to-day, I see." His quick, restless, eager eyes had noted the tell-

tale signs of mischief about him before he hazarded that remark.

"Yes, oh, yes!" breathed Susie in great relief. "Tabitha's taken the rest of the children down to the river, and we're all alone."

"The river?"

"The Colorado. We often go there when we can get the assayer's horses, but the wagon won't hold us all, so we three stayed at home to-day."

"And had ice-cream sodas for being good," added Irene.

"We *wanted* to make some taffy," mourned Inez, ruefully eyeing the blackened mass which the mysterious stranger was deftly removing from the stove and floor.

"'Twas so lonesome here by ourselves," supplemented Susie apologetically, remembering that she was responsible for the candy suggestion.

"So 'while the cat's away the mice will play'," chuckled the man, beginning a vigorous scraping of the sticky kettle.

"Why, how did you know her name was Catt?" cried Irene in amazement.

"Goosie!" exclaimed Susie sarcastically.

"He didn't know. That's not what he meant. But truly, mister, I don't think Tabitha would have minded a bit if our candy had come out all right. As 'tis, we've wasted such a lot of m'lasses and sugar that I reckon she'll scold——"

"If she ever finds it out," broke in Inez.

"That's it—*if* she ever finds it out," chuckled the man again. "Who is this mysterious Tabitha that you are so scared of?"

"We ain't *scared* of her," protested Susie loyally. "Her name is Tabitha Catt, and she's taking care of us while mamma is with papa at the hospital in Los Angeles. She's only a girl herself, but we promised to mind her so mamma could go, and not fret about us all the time, and we're trying hard to keep our promise."

"But sometimes we forget," said truthful Irene. "We oughtn't to have made that candy, 'cause we told her we wouldn't get into mischief while she was gone. I guess that's why it burnt up."

"I guess it's no such thing!" Inez contradicted hotly. "You made such a fuss over

nothing that Susie and me forgot to watch it and it boiled over."

"I guess you'd have made a fuss if I'd blistered your hand like you did mine," cried Irene in great indignation, suddenly remembering her grievance, and affectionately regarding the white blister on her plump hand. "Then on top of that you told me to suck it off, when you knew it was boiling hot and would skin my whole mouth."

"Tut, tut!" interrupted the stranger, seeing that a quarrel was imminent. "Now don't get mad all at once. I've a proposition to make to you——"

"A what?" asked Susie, glad she had taken no part in the flare-up between the twins.

"A bargain. I'll make you a mess of candy that'll pop your eyes out if you will give me a square meal,—something to eat, you know, and plenty of it. I'm hungry as the deuce, and candy ain't very filling. Is it a go?"

Susie looked at her crestfallen companions, and they looked at her.

"There were no potatoes left from dinner," began Irene.

"But there's any number of cans of stuff in the pantry," said Inez hastily.

"Salmon and sardines and veal loaf and corned beef and vegetables," added Susie hopefully, yet fearful lest the menu should not prove sufficiently tempting to the queer, unexpected, unknown visitor. "And Tabitha cut the cake for dinner."

"Besides cookies and crackers and bread," murmured Irene, seeing reproof in her sisters' eyes, and feeling that she had been inhospitable to their hungry guest.

"Good!" promptly answered the man. "I reckon we'll make out. Just open a tin of salmon, make a pot of strong coffee, and bring on your bread and cake and sauce—lots of it, now, for I haven't had a bite to eat since last night. Lost my money, you know, and it hurts a decent fellow's pride to beg."

The trio nodded sympathetically, and hurried to do his bidding, while he rapidly measured out fresh supplies of sugar and syrup, and briskly began stirring the mass over the fire, talking all the while. "I just happened to be passing when I smelled your stuff burn-

ing, and thinks I, now there's trouble in there. Just then you all commenced screaming, and I was sure the house was a-fire, so I rushed in to help. Good gracious, but I was scared for a minute when I see the flames jumping so high. You might have had an explosion any minute."

"Yes," gravely agreed the girls, the look of terror returning to their eyes.

"If it hadn't been for you, I reckon the house would have burned down, and it's the only one we've got," said Irene.

He nodded. "I understand, and so I thought you wouldn't begrudge me a bite to eat, after I had put out the fire and cleaned up the clutter so Tabitha wouldn't know that you had been in mischief."

"Course we're glad to give you something to eat," Inez again hastily interrupted. "'Specially when you are making us some more candy. Are you ready for your—lunch —now?"

"In a jiffy. Just grease a pan for this dope and I'll pour it out to cool. Bet it beats yours all hollow. There! Set it in the window—so! Now, I'll sample your larder. Looks fine and

smells bully. Which store is best here in town?"

"Brinkley's," promptly answered the trio, with longing eyes fixed upon the golden flood of syrup cooling in the window.

"Though Dawley's is bigger," added Irene.

"Do they make much money?"

"They ought to. Prices are high enough," answered Susie with a comically grown-up air.

"Most of the miners trade at Dawley's, 'cause he don't hurry 'em so about paying," said Inez naively. "But the Carsons and Catts and Dr. Hayes, and those folks buy at Brinkley's, 'cause his stuff is nicer."

"We *did* trade there," began Irene, but Susie interrupted, "Most of our stuff comes from Los Angeles now. "It's cheaper to trade that way, and anyhow, papa knows the man real well, and now that he's sick in the hospital, he doesn't have to worry about pay day all the time, for this man will wait till he is well enough to work again."

"When is pay day?" casually inquired the man. "I mean how often does it come?"

"Once a month—the fifteenth."

The stranger's eyes glittered with satisfac-

tion, and he muttered, "The fifteenth,—that's to-morrow."

"What did you say?" asked Susie.

"I was just thinking," he replied, glancing uneasily from one bright face to the other to see if any of the children had caught his indiscreet remark. "By the way, who lives in that little, unpainted house on the edge of town?" He pointed vaguely over his shoulder, and the sisters looked at each other in bewilderment.

"The pest house?" suggested Irene.

"The Ramsey place?" said Inez questioningly.

"The haunted house?" ventured Susie. "You see, there are so many unpainted houses on the edge of town."

"The haunted house!" laughed the stranger incredulously. "Whoever heard tell of a haunted house in a mining camp!"

"Silver Bow has one," stoutly asserted the twins.

"Where? Which one? I confess I am curious."

"It's the last one on the East End Lode," replied Susie with dignity, feeling that the reputation of her town was at stake.

"The queer old shack beyond Tabitha's," added Inez.

"There are only three houses in that hollow," explained Irene. "The Carson's big house, the Catt's littler one, and this haunted house."

"What haunts it?" jeered the man, pushing back from the table and glancing sharply down the trail toward town.

"A—a ghost," the twins half whispered.

"A man killed himself there once," said Susie.

"Or was murdered," shuddered Inez.

"Or else he just died," put in practical-minded Irene. "Anyway, they found him there dead."

"And sometimes now folks hear queer things there."

"And see lights."

"Tabitha never has," Irene declared. "And she lives nearest it."

"Well, 't any rate, it's haunted and no one ever goes there now, not even Tabitha, who ain't afraid of a *thing*."

The stranger rose slowly to his feet, yawned as if bored by their chatter, picked up his hat,

and started for the door; then paused, and casually surveying the pan of taffy on the window sill, remarked, "Believe if I was you, I'd eat that all up before the rest of the folks get back. There's just about enough for three, and I've a notion that Miss Tabitha will think you didn't keep your promise very well if she ever finds out how near you came to setting the house a-fire. She'll never dare trust you again. It might be well not to mention that I dropped in, either. Tramps aren't often welcome visitors, even in a mining camp, you know. But I appreciate your dinner, and thank you kindly. Good-day, ladies."

"Good-day," they echoed mechanically, and with puzzled eyes watched him disappear in the direction of the railroad station on the flats. Then they faced each other.

"Do you s'pose we better—" began Susie slowly.

"Not tell?" ventured Inez.

"And eat all the candy ourselves?" added Irene.

There was a moment's pause while three active brains worked furiously.

Then Susie sighed, "I b'lieve he's right.

Tabitha would never trust us again. We better keep still about the whole thing."

"Then we'll have to hurry and clear up this mess," said Irene. "We can hide the candy until later, but this table would give everything away."

So the trio flew to work again, put away the remains of the tramp's dinner, washed the telltale dishes, and had the kitchen in its usual spick and span order when the rest of the large family returned an hour later from their sojourn to the river. If their consciences pricked them a little for their deception, they said nothing, not even to each other; and it was several days before the young housekeeper discovered their secret.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE CANYON

THE next day was Saturday, and the morning dawned so hot and sultry that almost before the old kitchen clock struck five, the restless eaglets were stirring once more.

"Now's the time I wish we didn't live so far up the mountain," sighed Mercedes, mopping her perspiring face on her sleeve as she struggled to button the dress she had just donned.

"Yes, summer's an awful trial here in this house," agreed Susie, trying to decide whether to put on her shoes and stockings and suffer from the heat in that manner, or to go barefooted and burn her tender soles on the hot sands.

"Le's do down to the river to-day," lisped Janie, lifting eager eyes to scan the dark face bending over, as Tabitha patiently brushed the tangled curls into smooth ringlets.

"Oh, let's!" seconded the twins.

"You know we had to stay at home yesterday when the rest of you went," wheedled Inez.

"And 'twould have been awful lonesome," began Irene, "if it hadn't been for that——"

"Ice-cream," hastily interposed Susie, giving the little blunderbus a warning glance. "Can't we go, Tabitha? It would be so much cooler there."

"I don't see how we can manage it," answered the flushed housekeeper, glancing longingly out of the window down the yellow ribbon of a road which wound its way in and out among the rocks and yuccas on its way to the muddy Colorado, seven miles away. "The assayer will be wanting his horses to-day and it's too far to walk."

"Can't we hire a team from the stables?" proposed Inez.

"And pay ten dollars a day for it?" scoffed Mercedes. "Where are you going to get your money to foot the bill?"

"Then let's catch enough burros to lug us all," suggested the resourceful Susie. "No

one would care. They run loose on the desert all the time."

Tabitha shook her head slowly, although her eyes gleamed appreciatively at the plan. If only Rosslyn and Janie were older! How she would enjoy such a frolic as Susie's suggestion would mean.

Only Gloriana remained discreetly silent. She shuddered whenever she recalled her first and only ride on one of the wicked little beasts,—that wild New Years Even when she and Tabitha had tried to keep Mr. McKittrick's claims from being jumped,—and she drew an audible sigh of relief at Tabitha's decision. But the next instant her heart sank within her, for with a scurry of feet in the narrow hallway, the door of the room was unceremoniously flung open, and two eager, boyish faces peered in.

"I say, Tab," began Billiard, so excited he could hardly refrain from shouting his news, "your Uncle Decker is out here——"

"And he's brung a whole—flock—of burros," broke in Toady, so anxious to tell part of the good news that he could not stop for choice of words.

"Saddled," Billiard hurried on, trying to beat Toady to the climax.

"For us!" cried the smaller boy.

"To ride to the canyon on!" bellowed the two as with one voice.

"Really?" gasped Tabitha.

"How perfectly scrumptious!" squealed the tribe of McKittrick.

"But Janie and Rosslyn," faltered Gloriana faintly. "Aren't they too small——"

"Oh, he's got a buckboard, too," grinned Billiard, who had recently discovered the red-haired maid's poor little secret; but forbore to make unkind remarks about it because he himself stood somewhat in awe of the sleepy-eyed demons of the desert, since one had unexpectedly kicked him when he was trying to mount. "He drove in for some provisions, and your father told him to bring us all back with him, and we're to *camp* at the mines until Monday. Won't that be great? Whoop-ee!" He leaped into the air, cracked his heels together and came down with a resounding thump which shook the whole house and made the dishes in the pantry rattle.

But no word of reproof was uttered, for

Tabitha had seized the half-dressed, half-combed Janie in her arms, and rushed from the room. It seemed impossible that anyone could have come up that narrow, rocky trail to the Eagles' Nest with a half dozen or more burros and a buckboard without her having heard them, but there they were lined up by the kitchen steps,—seven sleepy-eyed, wicked little burros, saddled and bridled, and a pair of small, wiry mustangs hitched to a light wagon, and driven by Decker Simmons, Mr. Catt's partner.

"Why, Uncle Decker!" Tabitha began.

"Didn't we tell you he was here?" exulted the two boys who had followed her.

"But—but—" she stammered.

"But she didn't b'lieve us," crowed Toady.

"I thought you must be mistaken," she confessed, "for I could not imagine anyone so crazy as to want *ten* children under foot at a mine. Whatever possessed Dad, Uncle Decker?"

The man laughed good-naturedly. "Thought we all needed a vacation, I reckon," he answered. "Are you anywhere near ready? Better hurry. Sun will soon be unmercifully

hot, and the canyon isn't exactly within walking distance. Can't I help?"

"No, thanks. It won't take us long——"

"We're ready now," announced the procession of girls crowded around her.

"Mercy finished Janie's hair while you stood here gabbing, Glory packed up what duds we'd need, and Billiard's got the house all locked up. Who's to take which burro?"

"Makes no difference," answered the man, chuckling at the despatch with which preparations for the outing were made. "Put the little tikes in here with me, and any of the rest of you who perfer the buckboard can pile in. That red—the girl with the game hip—you better ride with us, too."

This suited Gloriana perfectly, and she lost no time in making herself comfortable among the leather cushions with Rosslyn and Janie beside her; but the rest of the party declined that method of transportation, and mounted the animals standing patiently in the scant shade of the porch. In less time than it takes to tell, the hilarious procession was on its way to the canyon, and the baking town was left behind.

"Let's race," cried Billiard, who was mounted on an innocent-looking, lazy beast.

"Come on!" cried Susie, giving her animal a prod with a sharp stick she had snatched from the woodpile as they clattered out of the yard; and away they flew, shouting and flapping reins, urging the stolid little burros out of their poky gait into a surprised run.

But the race came to an abrupt and unexpected end. Susie's mount seemed more ambitious than its mates, or else the youthful rider goaded it to desperation; for, with a mighty spurt, it took the lead, and shot three lengths ahead of the rest, cantering off across the desert as if racing were its daily delight. Rosy-cheeked Susie glanced back over her shoulder, waved the sharp stick triumphantly in the air, and jeered, "Yah, yah! Why don't you come along? Has you burro gone to sleep?"

This was too much for Billiard, and grabbing a needle-pointed Spanish bayonet frond from the hands of his brother, he gave the brown-coated beast beneath him a vicious stab, as he yelled in disgust, "Giddap, you old demon! Wake up and stretch your legs a lit——"

Brownie awoke into surprising activity, leaped forward with unseating suddenness, planted his forefeet firmly among the rocks, and with one deliberate, energetic kick, sent Billiard flying through the air. The watchers behind held their breath in terror. Would the boy be killed for his folly? Then a wild shout of laughter rose from eight throats. But who could have resisted it? For the luckless Billiard, after turning a summersault high in the air, fell astraddle the neck of Toady's burro, and slipped to the ground in a sprawling heap, while the second startled beast bolted across the desert with its plucky rider still clinging to its back.

The dazed Billiard picked himself up from the ground considerably shaken but not hurt, and gazing ruefully first after his own fleeing burro, and then after Toady's, now far in advance of Susie's little animal, remarked, "Well, the old thing has got *some* ginger in him after all! Do you suppose I can ever catch him?"

"I'll help," quickly volunteered Tabitha, trying hard to suppress her mirth, so meek and woebegone was the tumbled figure stand-

ing in the roadway; and with a nimble spring she landed beside him, tethering her burro to a yucca, growing close at hand. Mercedes and the twins followed her example, but it was a lively chase they had before the unruly animal was finally captured, and the party continued its journey, reaching their destination without further mishap.

Gloriana was disappointed at first, as she looked about her while her companions were dismounting, for she had expected to see a canyon like those lovely spots hidden among the San Bernardino hills; but this place was no different from the rocky, barren mountains surrounding Silver Bow. However, there was little time for lamentations, for with surprising ingenuity, Mr. Catt had arranged a delightful program for the two days the young folks were in camp, and not a moment of the brief holiday was dull even for Rosslyn and Janie. So it was with reluctant hearts that the party mounted their burros Monday morning for their return trip.

"Where are the boys?" inquired Mercedes curiously, as she sprang nimbly into her saddle and gathered up the reins ready to start.

"Susie isn't here, either," said Tabitha, pausing in her task of packing to count noses. "They must be in the tent. I saw them not very long ago. Dad, are the boys ready?"

"Haven't seen them," he answered emerging from one of the tents with a light grip and dumping it into the back of the buckboard.

"I saw Billiard and Toady whispering something to Susie just as the wagon drove up," tattled Inez, provoked to think she had not been included in the secret, "and they all ran off that way." She pointed up the mountainside, where the mesquite and cacti grew thickest, and huge boulders made climbing difficult.

"What in the world possessed them to go off like that?" fretted Tabitha, impatient at the unexpected delay.

"Bet I know," Irene piped up. "They prob'ly went for a last look at the puppies."

"Puppies!" cried the others in amazement. "Where are there any puppies about here?"

"Quite a piece up there on the other side,—they weren't going to tell the rest of us, but I happened to find them myself."

"Here they come now," Rosslyn excitedly interrupted; and sure enough, the trio had appeared on the hillcrest, each tugging something which squirmed and twisted, and snarled and yapped until their flushed, panting owners could scarcely hold them.

"Holy snakes!" ejaculated Decker Simmons.

Mr. Catt whistled. The rest of the party stared.

"What in creation have you got, Susie McKittrick?" demanded Mercedes, with all the severity her gentle nature could muster, as the three children came within speaking distance, Susie in advance.

"A pup," gasped the red-faced girl, taking a fresh grip on the wriggling, sharp-nosed little animal, half hidden in the torn skirt of her dress. "Isn't he cute? See what bright eyes he's got."

"And see how you've snagged your clothes," said Irene reprovingly.

"And scratched your face," added Inez, glad now that she had not been a party in the expedition.

"That's nothing to what Billiard's did to

him," Susie retorted sharply, nettled at her reception. "He picked out the prettiest of the bunch for Tabitha. We told him how much you used to want a dog all your own, Kitty. But it's the wildest thing I ever saw. Here he comes now. Billiard, didn't you choose your pup for Tabitha?"

"Would you accept it?" he panted somewhat shyly, embarrassed and a little provoked that Susie should have announced his intentions the first thing. "I—I got the handsomest fellow of them all, but I pretty near had to club it to death before it would come along peaceably."

"But Billiard," gasped Tabitha, finding her tongue at last, "that isn't a pup!"

"What is it then?" Susie bristled so aggressively that she forgot to keep a tight hold on her unwilling prisoner, and with a final scratch and yap of exultation, it freed itself from her arms, and darted away among the sagebrush.

"A coyote."

"No!" Toady dropped his as if it were poison, and lifted startled eyes to Tabitha's face.

"You're fooling!" cried Susie in exasperation over her loss.

"Dad, Uncle Decker, isn't that a baby coyote?"

Both men nodded silently, a look of amusement flickering about their lips.

"But—but—" spluttered Billiard, still hugging his half-smothered treasure to his bosom. "It—they *look* like pups."

"Yes, they do, but you found them pretty frisky for pups, didn't you?"

"They *were* pretty lively," admitted the older boy slowly.

"And as scratchy as—" began Toady.

"As *cats*," finished Susie, angry at Tabitha for calling the animals coyotes, angry at her sisters for laughing, and angry at herself for not knowing the truth of the matter without being told.

"That's so, too," agreed Mr. Catt amiably. "It beats me how you ever managed to catch them."

"It was a job," sighed Billiard regretfully, freeing the pretty little ball wrapped so snugly in his coat, and watching it skulk away after

its two brothers. "We had some empty sacks——"

"But they weren't much good," Susie broke in contemptuously. "If it hadn't been for that can of meat we swiped, we'd never have caught 'em. They bite like everything, as well as scratch."

"Yes," said Billiard mournfully, taking the reins from Tabitha's hands and mounting his burro, "and we had all our pains for nothing."

"Not quite," whispered Tabitha sympathetically. "I understand, and I'm glad you took such trouble for me. But hurry. It's late already, and will be terribly hot before we reach home."

So the party said good-bye to the canyon and set out briskly on their long ride back to Silver Bow, but Tabitha was exultant, for Billiard, unruly, rebellious Billiard was at last completely won.

CHAPTER XII

THE BANK OF SILVER BOW IS ROBBED

"It must have rained here since we left," observed Toady, as they drew near the town.

"Why?" asked Irene curiously.

"'Cause there's a puddle of water in that hollow rock and unless it had rained, how would it get there?"

"By Jove, the lad is right," muttered Decker Simmons to himself. "Queer we didn't get any at the canyon, though. Wonder what's the trouble ahead. Town seems excited. Do you suppose the new postmaster has embezzled his funds already?"

"Uncle Decker," Tabitha's voice interrupted his meditations.

"Yes?"

"Something must have happened in town while we were gone."

"Why?"

"Main street is full of people and the bank platform is black with them. Do you suppose there is another run on the bank, or can it have failed?"

"Why, so 'tis!" ejaculated the man, noting for the first time what Tabitha's keen eyes had seen,—that the greater crowd of the people were gathered in front of the Silver Bow Bank. "Wonder what's up."

"Hello, Simmons," called Dawley, the grocer, from his position in the doorway of his store. "You don't look as if you'd heard the news."

"No. Let's have it." The whole party halted and waited curiously.

"Bank robbed."

"You don't say so! When?"

"Saturday night."

"Get much?"

"Don't know yet, but reckon 'twas only a few hundred. Brinkley lost a lot of provisions, too, but fortunately his safe was empty."

"Well, I declare! Any clue?"

"Not so far. Rain wiped out all tracks that might have been made. Had a corker of a thunderstorm that night."

"Well, well! Now what do you think of that! What steps are you taking toward the capture of the thieves?"

"Posse out scouring the desert."

"Humph!"

"Well, what else can we do without clues?"

"*Find* some clues. You'll never catch the rascals by scouring the desert with a handful of men. They must have gone into camp close by, or they would never have stocked up. Bet they are new at the business. *Must* be to make a mistake like that. I'd laugh if they had never left town." And gathering up the reins, he drove on, followed by the cavalcade of burros.

The children were greatly excited. Burglaries in that lonely little desert town were unheard of, and this novel experience furnished food for their lively imaginations to feed upon. Tabitha was particularly impressed, for never before in her short life had a robbery occurred so near home, and she could think of little else. A reward of two hundred dollars had been offered for the capture of the thieves, and as soon as the little brood in the Eagles' Nest heard of this, they

began to amuse themselves by telling how they would spend the money if by chance they could win the reward.

"I'd buy me a pony," said Toady, as they sat on the shady side of the house discussing the all-absorbing topic. "Ma said she never should get us another after Spotty kicked her when she struck it with the whip."

"I'd save it towards a motorcycle," declared Billiard boastfully. "No ponies for mine! With another hundred I could get a dandy machine, and then wouldn't you see me spinning about the country just as I pleased!"

"It would almost pay for another term at Ivy Hall," sighed Mercedes, who, though she never mentioned the matter, knew that the family purse was too flat to permit of her returning to her beloved school with the coming of September.

"I'd buy a little house in Los Angeles and go there to live," said Irene. "It must be pretty where there are real trees and flowers the year around."

"It's not your turn," Susie objected. "I'd buy—I'd buy—what *would* I buy? There are so many things I want, but I b'lieve I'd go

travelling. Two hundred dollars would take me quite a piece, and I'd see lots of big cities."

"And I'd go along," breathed Inez in ecstasy, "and we'd beat our way back on freight cars."

"Ho! That wouldn't be any fun," scoffed Rosslyn. "I'd buy candy, 'n' ice-cream, 'n' peanuts, 'n' popcorn."

"And a doctor," laughed Mercedes.

There was a pause, and seven pair of eyes turned expectantly toward Gloriana, who, perceiving the look, said shyly, "There are probably heaps of things I'd like to get for myself now and then, but I think the most of my two hundred would go to Granny Conover for taking care of me all those years. I'd like to see her have plenty of money to do as she pleased with before she dies."

"Wouldn't that be splendid?" cried the children, who were never tired of hearing the pitiful tale of Gloriana's life.

"Now, Tabitha," suggested Billiard. "Why, where *is* Tabitha?"

"Gone to put Janie to bed, I guess," said Toady, seeing that the youngest member of

the family was also missing. "It's her nap time."

But in reality, Tabitha was far down the mountainside, speeding like a deer in pursuit of a tiny, white-clad figure toddling in and out among the sagebrush and greasewood toward a forbidden playground, where, half-hidden by rocks and rubbish, were several unprotected prospect holes, mysterious and alluring to the investigative baby eyes. Even as Tabitha came within calling distance of the child, Janie discovered that she was being pursued, and quickened her steps into a run, heedless of the path she was taking, until with a shrill cry of fright, she slipped over the brink of one of the very holes she had stolen away to visit, and disappeared from sight.

"O, God, don't let her be killed!" prayed the black-eyed girl, and her feet fairly flew over the uneven ground, till she, too, reached the edge of the deep excavation. But before she could discover the plight of the runaway, she felt the ground give way beneath her feet, and echoing Janie's cry of alarm, she, too, shot out of sight. Fortunately, however, little sand fell with her, and as by a miracle, she landed

free and clear of the frightened, sobbing, but unhurt figure crouching in the opposite corner.

Scrambling to her feet, she seized the scared baby in her arms, exclaiming over and over again, "Janie, Janie, are you sure you aren't killed?" till at length she had soothed the child's fright and had coaxed her into laughing again. "Now, Miss Mischief," she cried, setting the baby down and beginning to investigate their prison, "we must find some way out of this place. 'Tisn't very deep, to be sure, but the sides seem pretty crumbly, so I don't dare to climb out. I reckon we'll have to shout. Help, help, help!"

They screamed themselves hoarse, but no one came to answer their call, and Janie began to wail dismally, for the minutes seemed like hours to her, and she was tired and cross. "Never mind, honey," Tabitha comforted. "If they don't find us around the house by supper time, they will know something has gone wrong and send General to find us. Now let's amuse ourselves for a while, and then we'll shout again. Here is a stick. See if you can dig a deeper hole than I can. Why, what's this?"

Stooping over to pick up a fragment of redwood bark at her feet, she uncovered a small bag, which rattled as she touched it; and as she untied the drawstring, a shower of glittering gold pieces fell into her lap.

"Pennies!" cried Janie, making a dive for a share of the shining coins.

"Yes, dear, gold pennies, but Janie musn't touch," answered Tabitha, busily sorting the money into various piles according to its denomination. "It doesn't belong to us, and we must take it to the—Say, Janie McKittrick, what will you bet this isn't the money stolen from the bank Saturday night? Mr. Dawley said they got only a few hundred. Let's count it. One, two, three, four, five hundred dollars. Janie, that's just what we've found! The robbers didn't dare take it with them, and so hid it here, thinking it would be absolutely safe."

"Well, Tabitha Catt! Of all things! Look, girls, she's as calm and cool as if she had gone on a picnic, instead of tumbling into a prospect hole."

So intent had the two prisoners become in their find that neither had heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and as breathless

Susie's voice rang out above their heads, both started guiltily.

"Why, how did you know where to look for us?" cried Tabitha, bouncing to her feet, and slipping the bag out of sight, lest the children see and ask questions.

"Well, when we couldn't find you about the house anywhere, Glory remembered that Janie had slipped off down the trail while we were talking, and so we decided that you must have chased her. Then Mercy happened to think of these holes. Janie is always possessed to play down here, and has run away three times before; so we came down to look, and here you are in the very first one," explained Susie.

"You hauled us out of the abandoned mine one day, and now we are going to fish you out of a prospect hole," exulted Billiard, much relieved to find the two girls unhurt, but unable to resist crowing a little over their mishap.

"How?" asked Tabitha, a frown of anxiety gathering in her forehead. "Don't get too near the edge there, or some of you may join us in our retreat. You must go for help. You can't get us out all alone."

"Mercy has gone for the assayer," began Inez.

"And here he is now," Billiard interrupted. "He has got a long board and a rope. Stand back, Irene, so you won't be in the way. There, now, Tabby, tie up the baby, and we'll lift her out first."

In a surprisingly short time, both girls were hoisted from the sultry pit and landed laughing gaily among their mates.

"Well," said the assayer, shaking his gray head in a puzzled fashion, "I don't understand how you kids work the stunt."

"What stunt?" they all inquired.

"Why, tumbling into every hole you come across and not getting hurt. You *aren't* hurt, are you?"

"No, indeed!"

"And Kitty finded a whole sack full of gold pennies down there, but her won't div Janie any," volunteered the baby quite unexpectedly.

"She—what?"

"Gold pennies!"

"What does she mean?"

The children lifted questioning eyes to

Tabitha's crimson face, and even the assayer looked down at her curiously. She had not meant to let the children know about the money; at least, not until she had consulted older and wiser heads than theirs; but now that Janie had betrayed her secret, she displayed her find, and explained how it had come into her possession.

The assayer's eyes grew thoughtful, as he examined each coin minutely, and counted the treasure, to make sure that Tabitha's figures were right. "What shall you do with it?" he finally asked, as he dropped the last piece into the sack and returned it to Tabitha.

"Take it to the bank. I thought it might be part of the money the robbers got."

He glanced at her quickly, keenly; then answered, "That's the thing to do, all right, and I don't believe your surmise is far off, either. But see here, children, don't you dare lisp a word to a single soul about this money until we know for certain whose it is."

"We won't," hastily promised the wondering, round-eyed flock, for they stood much in awe of the silent, almost taciturn man who worked wonders with the rock which the

miners brought him; and the little company set out for home, leaving Tabitha and the assayer to carry the precious find over to the bank.

"Do you know," said Gloriana, as the black-eyed girl finished relating the afternoon's happenings to her, "I half believe that man snooping around the pesthouse is the robber."

"What man?" demanded the startled Tabitha.

"Well, I don't know who he is, but it is someone I've never seen here in town. He was there this morning, but I didn't think much about it then. We were so excited over the robbery. But this afternoon while the assayer was dragging you out of the prospect hole, and I was watching through your field glasses, I happened to turn them in the direction of the pesthouse, and there he was again, humped up on the doorsill, watching through glasses of his own. When you started off toward town, he hustled into the house and shut the door. Now, it seems to me no one would stay in a *pesthouse* unless he was hiding from someone."

"No one ever had smallpox there."

"Then why does everyone avoid it so?"

"I don't know. The name, I reckon. It was built for a pesthouse, but the doctors decided the patient didn't have smallpox after all, so the building has never been used."

"Then perhaps he knows there is nothing to be afraid of in the house."

"That may be, of course. Is he there yet?"

"Yes, I think he is. I've kept a close lookout ever since I discovered him, and I haven't seen him leave."

Tabitha seemed lost in thought a moment, then turned an eager face toward her companion. "Gloriana, the reward!"

"Could we?"

"Can't tell till we try!"

"But how——"

"There are only two small windows in the house,—funny, isn't it, when air is so necessary in case of sickness,—he can't get out of them. So all we have to do is guard the door."

"But how shall we get him to the—police?"

"Sheriff? I hadn't thought of that part. We couldn't tie him up and march him to jail,—we aren't strong enough, just us girls. We'll have to make sure he is there, lock him

in, and then while one of us guards the door, the other must go for help."

Gloriana shuddered. She hoped it would not fall to her lot to guard the door, and yet she could not bear to think of Tabitha's staying there alone with only a flimsy structure between her and a desperate character.

"I—we—had we better try it alone?" she asked timidly. "Wouldn't it be wiser to tell the assayer and get him to help?"

"The more people there are connected with his capture, the smaller our share of the reward will be. We can do it all right."

Tabitha's daring swept away her objections. "That's so," she answered. "Well, we better not wait any longer then, or perhaps he will get away yet."

"I'm ready," Tabitha replied promptly, and with quaking hearts but determined steps the two set out, armed with a stout stick and the rusty old pistol which Gloriana had used the night the boys had played burglar.

"What is that broom handle for?" questioned the red-haired girl, wondering if *she* would be expected to crack the desperado over the head with it.

"To lock the door with."

"*Lock the door?*" Could Tabitha have gone suddenly crazy?

"Yes. It's the only way we can fasten him in. The door has an iron handle on the outside, instead of a knob, you see."

"Oh!"

"Is that the man?" The door of the pest-house had opened abruptly and a short, portly man roughly dressed, unshaved and florid of complexion, appeared on the threshold a moment, eyed the approaching girls indifferently, glanced searchingly toward town, and again vanished within, closing the door behind him. Gloriana's heart seemed to stop beating, then pounded so loudly that it sounded to her like the pulsing of the engines in the Silver Legion Mine. "Yes," she gasped.

"Then we've got him!" Scared but exultant, Tabitha leaped to the door, thrust her stick through the handle, and cocked her revolver, just as the man, hearing the noise outside, grasped the knob and tried to open the door.

"What the deuce!" they heard him exclaim, and then he wrenched again. "Who's out

there, and what do you want?" he bellowed in rage, when the door refused to budge.

"You're our prisoner," Tabitha answered boldly, though trembling like a leaf with nervous dread; "and you might just as well keep quiet as to make a fuss. Glory, hurry for the sheriff, the assayer—anyone! He's desperate!"

And indeed he sounded desperate as he kicked and banged the door, shouted and swore, tearing about his small prison like a madman, and breathing threats of vengeance against his jailer, who stood pale but undaunted in front of the door, with a cocked revolver clinched tightly in both hands, waiting anxiously for the return of Gloriana with help from town, and thanking her lucky stars that neither of the small windows was on the door side of the house.

Then suddenly the tumult ceased within, and terrified Tabitha began to take courage again. "He has decided to behave himself at last," she thought. "It's the only sensible thing to do, for he can't get away from here now without being caught. There comes Glory at last, but oh, gracious! look

at the crowd following her. Half the town is out."

Just then a subdued grunt from around the corner of the house caught her attention, and beckoning wildly to the approaching throng, she crept cautiously forward to investigate, but paused again, paralyzed at the sight which met her eyes. The portly prisoner had attempted to escape by means of one of the small windows, and now hung suspended by the middle over the sill, his hands clawing the air helplessly inside, and his heels waving frantically without. At another time, Tabitha would have shouted with laughter at the ridiculous figure he cut, but now her only thought was to prevent his escaping, and flinging aside her pistol, she plunged toward the body seesawing through the air, and clutched the feet with a determined grip, while the helpless victim protested in emphatic language.

Thus the crowd found them and went wild with delight at the spectacle, much to the discomfiture of both captor and captive, and when at length the florid prisoner was freed from his uncomfortable position, his face was

purple with rage and exertion. "What is the meaning of this outrage?" he exploded as soon as he could find sufficient breath to voice his indignation. "Who put you up to such a trick as that, you young minx? Do you know who I am?"

"Why, Jerry Weller!" exclaimed an astonished voice from the interested throng of onlookers. "What are you doing here?"

"I bought this old shack and was to have had it moved onto my claims to-day, if the movers had showed up," exclaimed the irate man, his voice thick with anger. "But along come these jades and fasten me in——"

"We thought he was the bank robber," Tabitha murmured faintly, sick at heart over the mistake. "He was acting so—so suspiciously."

"Bank robber!" echoed the speaker from the crowd. "Why, Jeremiah Weller is owner of the biggest placer mines in the country. He made a fortune in Alaska. He's a millionaire! Bank robber! Ha—ha! That's rich!'

The crowd roared appreciatively, but the victim of the mistake quite unexpectedly lost

his glowering look, and gruffly declared, "Well, you needn't laugh at her. She's pluck to the backbone. Show me another girl who would have undertook to corral a bank robber as she did. I don't wonder she thought that was my occupation. I certainly look rough enough—" Suddenly his roving eyes fell upon the timid, shrinking Gloriana, so depressed at the way matters had turned out that she could scarcely keep back the scalding tears. If it had not been for her, Tabitha would never have gone on such a wild-goose chase. Why hadn't she kept her suspicions to herself?

"What's your name?" demanded the stranger so abruptly that he seemed positively rude.

"Gloriana Holliday," she managed to articulate.

"Did you ever have an Uncle Jerry?"

"If I did, he never came near us that I can remember," she candidly replied.

The purple of his face deepened. "That's right, too," he muttered. "But your mother ran away to get married."

"And her folks told her never to let them

see her face again," supplemented Gloriana bitterly.

"Was her name Weller at one time? But of course it was. There couldn't be two people on earth look as much alike as she and you unless they were mother and daughter; and besides, she married a Holliday,—Jack Holliday."

Gloriana nodded.

"Then, my girl, I'm your Uncle Jerry, and if you didn't catch your bank robber, you made a pretty good haul anyway. Your mother—she—she's—dead, isn't she? And your father? You're an orphan——"

"She's not any longer!" Tabitha broke in savagely. "We've adopted her and she's my sister."

"Oh! Well, that simplifies matters, too, for I'm a bachelor and have no *home* to offer, but— Say, I want to talk with you. Where's your adopted father? Not in town now? Well, isn't there some place we can go where we won't be gawked at by all these hoodlums? Bring your black-haired sister,—my jailer. I certainly do admire pluck."

At this broad hint, the curious crowd re-

luctantly withdrew, and left the trio alone at the pesthouse threshold. Standing there bare-headed with the waning sunlight glinting through the heavy, red locks, Gloriana told what she could remember of the pitiful struggle of her parents, their deaths, and her unhappy lot until the scholarship at Ivy Hall had opened the way to better things.

So affected was the bluff stranger by the sad tale that he made no effort to check the tears which filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. "Well, the past is passed," he said when the story was done, "and we can't do anything now to change it. I've been downright sorry at the way we treated your mother, but she effaced herself pretty well. We never got a trace of her whereabouts, though years afterwards we heard that she was dead. We never knew there was a child, but never mind, you shall not want again as long as I live. Being a rover and unmarried, I have no home to offer, as I said before; so I am glad to find you settled with such good friends. But I've got all kinds of money, and insist upon paying for your education from now on. Here's a check for pin money."

Drawing a check-book from his pocket, he rapidly scribbled a few lines, tore out the slip and handed it to Gloriana. Mechanically she took it, and her gray eyes grew round with wonder as she read. "One hundred dollars! Oh, you must have made a mistake, Mr.——"

"Uncle Jerry," he corrected her.

"Uncle Jerry," she dutifully repeated.

"Not a bit of it! And what's more, there will be one of those ready for you every quarter."

"Oh, that's too much!" she protested. "Whatever would a girl do with four hundred dollars a year spending money?" The sum appalled her, and well it might, for never before had she possessed more than five dollars at one time.

He laughed at her dismay. "Why, I often spend that much in a day. You can lay in a stock of jimcracks like the other girls have. You'll find plenty of ways to dispose of every cent, I know."

"Maybe," she half whispered. "You see, I never had so much as a dollar all my own that I can remember until I came to live with Tabitha, but perhaps when I get used to know-

ing it's really mine and —genuine, I'll find ways to spend it. I—I thank you. It's nice to have an Uncle Jerry."

"It's nice to have a Niece Gloriana, too," he answered gruffly, clearing his throat with much gusto; and as there seemed to be nothing further to say, the trio turned from the lonely pesthouse, and silently climbed the hill toward town.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ROBBERS AND THE HAUNTED HOUSE

"BILLIARD, did you ever see a ghost?"

It was almost a week since the bank robbery had occurred, and still no clue as to the identity of the robbers had been found, although posses were still searching the country, determined to catch them if such a thing were possible. But the excitement of the event had already died down in the youthful minds of Silver Bow, and other topics of conversation absorbed their attention.

"Naw," answered Billiard contemptuously, without looking up from the stick he was whittling. "What's eating you, Toady? There ain't any ghosts, and you know it."

"What about that haunted house in the east end of town?"

"'Tain't haunted."

"Susie says it is."

"And Tabitha has lived alone near it for six or seven years and she has never seen anything stirring there."

"But ghosts walk only at midnight. She's never been there at night."

"Aw, you softy——"

"Susie says the Gates boy declares he saw a ghost in the graveyard one night."

"Well, that's different. I don't blame a ghost for walking there."

"Why, Billiard McKittrick, what do you mean?"

"Did you ever see a lonesomer place on earth than the Silver Bow graveyard?" demanded Billiard. "Why, it's the worst looking cemetery in the country, I believe,—just heaps of rocks and wooden sticks to show where folks are buried. Tabitha says they *blast* out the graves with dynamite, six at a time, and fill them up with people as fast as they die. Would you rest easy if you were planted in that style? Wouldn't your ghost want to get out and walk?"

"*Billiard McKittrick!*" Toady looked positively shocked. Then after a moment, as the older boy made no reply, the younger one

continued thoughtfully, "Maybe that's what is the matter with the ghost in the haunted house."

"Oh, pshaw, Toady, I tell you there ain't such a thing as a ghost!"

"I'll stump you to go down to the haunted house some time and find out."

"All right, come along!"

"Not during daylight. It must be after dark. Midnight is the best time, Susie says."

"Bother Susie! Why don't you get her to go with you?"

"You are afraid to go!" jeered Toady.

"Am not!" retorted Billiard angrily.

"Then why don't you take my dare?"

"It's all tommy-rot," insisted Billiard, with a fine show of scorn.

"'Fraid cat!"

"Oh, I'll take you up," cried the other, stung into recklessness by Toady's taunts. "We'll go to-night."

"To-night?" stammered Toady, much abashed at his brother's sudden acceptance of the dare.

"Yes, to-night!"

"What's your hurry?"

"Who's the 'fraid cat now?" taunted Billiard.

"Not me! To-night's the time. We'll set the alarm-clock for half-past ten."

"Suppose it wakes the rest of the bunch?"

"They'll think it's a mistake, and in a few minutes will be asleep again, and we can steal outside without their hearing us at all."

So it was decided, and though each boy, deep down in his heart, hoped that the other would back out before the hour set, both resolved not to show the white feather, and as the alarm-clock pealed forth its summons in the silence of the night, two sleepy lads crept stealthily out of bed, drew on their clothes, and without exchanging a word, started for the haunted house at the other end of town.

Never, it seemed to the quaking boys, had the desert night seemed so black. The stars were shining, to be sure, but the very heavens seemed further away, and the silence was appalling. Nervous, excited, dreading the ordeal, each boy waited for the other to propose that they give up their wild-goose chase; but neither was willing to acknowledge his cowardice first, so they stumbled fearfully on,

clutching each other's hands to keep from falling, they told themselves, but really to feel the nearness of another human being.

At length, however, they reached the old, abandoned shack, where they were to keep their ghostly vigil, and with bated breath they opened the sagging door and crept trembling over the threshold into the black shadows of the interior. Fear held them tongue-tied, and they crouched upon the dusty floor as close to the door as they could get. The silence was intense, terrifying.

Then the stillness was sharply broken by a hoarse whisper, "What was that, Bill?"

Billiard, thinking Toady had spoken to him, was about to reply when a second voice answered, "Only the wind, I reckon. Shut up."

"But it sounded like someone opened the door."

"You're as bad as an old woman with the fidgets," said the second voice crossly. "Go to sleep, can't you? At least, let me sleep. I tell you we're safe enough. The fools will never think of looking for us here. This is a *haunted* house and no one ever comes here. When they get tired of scouring the desert and

give up hunting for us, we'll light out, but until then we've *got* to lie low; and we might as well spend our time snoozing as to be worrying all the while."

"The bank robbers!" thought each boy to himself. What should they do? It would be impossible for two small boys to capture such desperadoes in the dead of night, especially as neither lad was armed, they argued. Their only course was to steal noiselessly away, rouse the sheriff, bring back a posse and surprise the men in hiding.

With one impulse, the terrified boys clasped hands, slipped cautiously out of the house, hardly daring to breathe for fear of being heard, and raced off along the road toward the sleeping town with all the speed they could muster. Once they fancied they heard a voice call to them, but this only increased their headlong flight. Their feet seemed fairly to skim over the ground, and when they reached the main street of the town they were breathless, exhausted and frightened almost past speaking.

"Where—does—the sheriff—live?" panted Billiard, as they tore down the last steep slope.

"Dunno," gasped Toady.

"Then how'll we find him?"

"Drug-store."

"It's shut."

"Ring the night bell."

And ring they did, sending peal after peal echoing through the silent building until the sleepy proprietor, dishevelled and wrathy, stumbled through the doorway, and demanded fiercely, "What the deuce is wanted?"

"The robbers—" half sobbed the boys.

"Well, they ain't here," snarled the angry druggist, not catching the meaning of their words. "Now you hike for home and the next time you want to play a practical joke——"

"Oh, this isn't a joke!" cried Toady imploringly. "We've found the sure 'nough robbers, but——"

"We aren't big enough to capture them," finished Billiard.

"Aw, come off!" said the man, beginning to see from the boys' demeanor that something was really wrong. "You are having a bad dream. How do you happen to be wandering around town this time of night?"

"We dared each other to visit the haunted house to see if there was a really ghost, like Susie said."

"And you found one, did you?" the druggist laughed sarcastically.

"Oh, this ain't a ghost. It's burglars, truly! They talked and we heard what they said," cried Toady with convincing earnestness.

"And what *did* they say?" persisted the druggist, though in a different tone of voice.

Briefly they recounted their adventure in the vacant house, and as the man listened he took down the telephone, said a few words which the boys could not hear, and hung up the receiver again. Almost immediately there was a sound of footsteps without, and an armed citizen of Silver Bow appeared in the doorway, then another, and another, until a score or more had gathered just outside the building. There was a hasty consultation one with another, then the boys were bidden to repeat the story they had told the druggist, and after the men had heard the meagre details, the posse separated, vanishing one by one in the blackness. But instinctively the boys knew that they would attempt to surround the

haunted house, and taking its occupants by surprise, would compel them to surrender.

They wanted to remain at the drug-store until the capture was effected, but the keeper ordered them home to bed, and they reluctantly obeyed, listening every step of the way for the sound of shots. But nothing occurred to mar the stillness of the night, and they wondered if the desperadoes had after all escaped. So anxious were they, and so nervous over their unusual experience that it seemed as if sleep would never come to close their eyes, as they lay once more in their bed at the Eagles' Nest; and they were astonished to find themselves waking up the next morning at the sound of someone knocking at their door.

"Who is it?" called Billiard, vaguely wondering if he could have dreamed all that had transpired during the past twelve hours.

"Susie," answered a voice from the hall. "The sheriff wants to see you."

"The sheriff?"

"Yes. Hurry up! The bank robbers have been caught and you have to go to the justice of the peace's office."

"Then it's really so," sighed Billiard in relief.

"Course it is!" retorted Toady, now thoroughly awake. "But what do you s'pose the *sheriff* wants us for?"

"Dunno. Quickest way to find out is to go down and see."

Susie and the twins were waiting for them when they emerged from their room, and ecstatically announced, "We're all going, too. They want you to be *witnesses,* and Tabitha to take notes. No one else in town writes shorthand."

"But what is it all about?" demanded Billiard. "Ain't the robbers in jail?"

"We have no real jail here," explained Tabitha, who chanced to overhear his question. "When a man does anything that he has to go to prison for, they take him to the county seat. This court only tries to prove whether or not there is evidence enough to hold him for trial by the county. Hurry up, they are waiting for us. And children, remember, you must come straight back here after you take a look at the prisoners. Queer

how youngsters want to see such things, isn't it? Perhaps it will be quite a while before I can get back, but I know I can trust you to keep out of mischief and mind Mercedes. Oh, Glory, I've got nervous chills already about taking that dictation. The lawyer who is to defend the robbers can talk like lightning."

"Fudge!" replied Gloriana reassuringly. "You won't have any trouble at all, I know. They will take into consideration the fact that you have no experience outside of school. Is *this* the place? What a funny looking court! Does he live here, too? The justice of peace, I mean."

"Why, Tabitha!" interrupted Irene, clutching the older girl by the arm. "Look there! That's our candy man,—the tallest one—and they've got him hand-cuffed. Does —Is *he* the man they say robbed the bank? I don't believe he ever did it!"

"Hush!" warned Inez, giving her twin a vicious dig in the ribs. But the damage was already done.

"What do you mean?" demanded Tabitha, pausing on the threshold of the tiny, dirty

room that served as courthouse for the town of Silver Bow.

"Yes, what do you mean?" asked one of the lawyers, who had chanced to overhear the remark.

"He made candy for us the day you went to the river and left us at home," explained Irene, ignoring the frowns of her partners in guilt.

"Tell us all about it."

Bit by bit the story came out, and to Irene's great grief it forged another link in the chain of evidence already so strong against the cheery stranger. "I don't want him to go to jail," she sobbed. "He's an awfully nice man."

"But, dear, he is a thief," Tabitha told her. "He ought to go to jail."

"If they'd only let him loose this time, I'm sure he would never steal again," the child staunchly maintained. But in spite of her faith in him, the "candy man," as the children continued to call him, was sent to the county seat for trial, convicted, and sentenced to a long term in prison.

"He shouldn't have stolen if he didn't want

to go to prison," asserted Billiard virtuously. "If he hadn't robbed the bank, he never would have had to hide in the haunted house and we wouldn't have found them there."

"But as 'tis," added Toady, "they paid Billiard and me each fifty dollars for finding them. I mean the town paid us."

"Though you didn't discover whether there are any ghosts or not," said Susie much disappointed.

"Who cares?" retorted the boys, drawing out their little hoard of gold pieces and gloating over them. "I wish there were more haunted houses if they'd all pay us as well as this one did. Now, what shall we do with our money?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

"ONLY two weeks more of vacation," sighed Tabitha, sinking wearily into the hammock one August afternoon, and looking longingly away to the west where the train was just puffing into view. "I never dreamed we should be here all summer when I offered to take care of the kidlets for Mrs. McKittrick."

"Are you sorry?" asked Gloriana, glancing up from her sewing in surprise at the tone of Tabitha's voice.

"No, oh, no!" she answered hastily, for fear her companion would think she was complaining. "I don't *regret* staying here at all, for that was the only way Mr. McKittrick could get well; but still—I should have enjoyed getting a peek at the ocean again, and having a good time all around, like we'd surely have had with Myra."

"Yes, that would have been lovely," sighed Gloriana, who could not help feeling sorry that their vacation had not turned out as they had planned, although she admired Tabitha more than ever because of the unselfishness which had prompted her to shoulder such a responsibility in the first place.

"You see, I never have spent the summer at the seashore," Tabitha continued; "nor anywhere else, for that matter, except here in Silver Bow, since we came here to live; and I had planned so much on Myra's invitation. She is such a whirlwind for fun."

"It's too bad Miss Davis didn't let us know any sooner that she didn't intend to come back to the desert till fall. Perhaps we could have found someone else—"

"I'm afraid not. It's awfully hard to get anyone dependable away out here. *Hired help* is simply out of the question. They think Silver Bow is beyond the bounds of civilization, I reckon."

"I don't blame them," began Gloriana impetuously; then blushed furiously, and stammered, "Oh, what did I say? What will you think of me? I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did mean it," laughed her companion. "And I don't blame *you*. I used to feel the same way myself."

"And did you *really* get over it?" Gloriana eagerly asked. "Do you truly like this—this desolate place now?"

"I *love Silver Bow*," she answered slowly, yet with emphasis. "I sometimes wonder what kind of a girl I would have been if we had stayed on at Dover or Ferndale, where there was no Carrie. Then there would have been no Ivy Hall, either, I suppose."

"And no *me*," half whispered the red-haired girl. "Then I should be thankful for the desert, too; because if it hadn't been for you, I never should have been adopted by the best people in the whole wide world, nor found an Uncle Jerry who really belongs to me. And anyway, there will be other summers, and the ocean will keep."

"No, it won't, either!" thrilled a bubbling voice behind them, and a red-faced, perspiring, disheveled figure swept around the corner of the house and plumped itself down in the hammock beside Tabitha whom she proceeded to hug rapturously.

"Myra!" gasped the black-haired girl, trying to return the embrace, but finding herself held fast by a pair of strong, sinewy arms.

"Myra!" echoed Gloriana, dropping her sewing and staring with fascinated eyes at the newcomer, who promptly dragged the lame girl from her chair into the already overloaded hammock and hugged her vigorously. "Where did you come from and *how* did you get here?"

"On the train," Myra paused long enough to pant, "and as to finding you,—haven't you described and sketched the Eagles' Nest often enough in your letters for me to know it when I saw it? I never even had to ask directions how to find the trail. Now just rustle your things together and we'll catch that train back to Los Angeles this afternoon. It leaves at three o'clock, doesn't it? I simply had to come after you, but it's too beastly hot to stay here a minute longer than necessary."

"But Myra, the children!" cried the two maids, looking oh! so eager at the mere thought of the seashore, but determined to turn their backs on temptation at once.

"Hark ye!" answered Myra in tragic

tones. "What sound doth smite your ears? Or be you *deef?*" Her abrupt change of tone and manner was too comical to be resisted, but her upraised hand checked the mirth of the other two, and they dutifully cocked their heads on one side and listened intently.

"The youngsters at play," both replied in the same breath.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess you're *deef.*"

At that moment sturdy Rosslyn flew around the corner of the cottage, and throwing himself into Tabitha's lap shrieked out, "Kitty, Kitty, mamma's come, but papa must stay down there till it gets cooler."

"What!" whispered Tabitha, her face paling. "It can't be! Is she truly?"

Myra nodded solemnly.

"What wonderful things are happening—" There was an ominous crack, the hammock rope snapped in two, and the quartette found themselves a tangled, huddled heap of arms and legs upon the piazza floor.

"Indeed, and I see nothing wonderful

about that," spluttered Myra, who had just opened her lips to speak, when their downfall came, and in consequence she had shut her sharp teeth together on her tongue.

Gloriana scrambled to her feet, then laughed. She could not help it, for long-limbed Myra did look so funny, sprawled on the floor like a huge spider; and amazement was written so large upon Tabitha's face that sterner hearts than hers would have made merry at the picture which they presented. Rosslyn's wail of grief checked her mirth, however, and she came hastily to his rescue, but his mother had heard the outcry, and now appeared on the scene with the remainder of her brood clinging to her skirts, and Billiard and Toady following close at their heels.

"Well, for the land sakes!" she ejaculated, holding up her hands in surprise and amusement. "What a sight! Are any of you hurt? That's good! Now, girls, perhaps it will seem rude and ungrateful to rush you off this way, but I had orders to see that you caught the train back to Los Angeles this afternoon. So I reckon you will have to move lively, with your packing and all."

"Who gave you such orders?" demanded Tabitha in bewilderment, rubbing her eyes to make sure she was not dreaming.

"Your father. I met him in the city just as I was about to board the train for Silver Bow."

"But—but—"

"No 'buts' about it," put in Myra, still sucking her injured tongue. "I accidentally ran up against Mrs. McKittrick in Los Angeles, knew her at once because Mercy looks so much like her, discovered that she was planning to come back here before school opened; so I just attached myself to her and came along—"

"Aha!" crowed Gloriana jubilantly. "Then all that tale about finding the Eagles' Nest without help was a—fib!"

Myra's face crimsoned and her tell-tale eyes dropped, then lifted again, twinkling like twin stars. "Huh!" she giggled, "our detective again! Say, are you going to catch that train at three o'clock? If so, just take wings to your feet and fly for home. Mrs. McKittrick can hear all about everything when you get back. The children are alive and well,

and that's the main point. I told her everything you had written me and—"

"Myra Haskell!"

"Well, she was on her way home and 'twas time she knew." She glanced across at Mrs. McKittrick, who smiled back through her tears. "And she says you are bricks. Also I told the station agent to send up his rig for your trunks, and if you don't make haste pretty lively, he'll be there before we are. I suppose your trunks are at your own house? That's where I told him to call. Now sling out the duds you've got here, and I'll pack them while you are getting slicked up. No, Mrs. McKittrick, I don't want another bite to eat, and it's evident from the looks of the house that either these folks don't get dinner, or else they have already eaten it."

"We've had it," volunteered Irene, "but it wasn't very good."

"Irene McKittrick!" gasped her mother.

"She is right," laughed Tabitha. "To-day was scrap dinner. We have it once a week to get rid of all the odds and ends. However, it isn't very popular. No, thanks, we won't need a lunch put up for us. If we get hungry

before we reach Los Angeles, we'll patronize the diner. Sorry we can't stop to tell you all the news, but if Dad said we must go back on this train, I suppose we must. Where are you staying, Myra? Avalon? Catalina Island?"

"The very same."

Tabitha clasped her hands together and drew a deep breath. "How perfectly splendid!"

"I guess I'm dreaming," murmured Gloriana, half aloud, pinching herself vigorously to make sure she was really awake. "Do you get there by boat?"

"Of course, goosie! Did you think we took an airship? Hurry up, slowpokes!"

Laughing and chattering gleefully, the trio gathered up their possessions, made a hurried visit to the Catt cottage, packed their trunks, and were at the station long before the train rumbled its way back to the great city by the sea.

"We are going to have the grandest kind of a time," Myra told them. "All sorts of high jinks. We've got a dandy site for our camp,—a dozen tents—"

"A dozen!" cried Tabitha in a panic. "Why, who are with you? I thought it was just your family."

"You knew Gwynne was there?"

"Yes, but she wouldn't occupy a dozen tents. I'm scared!"

"You needn't be," mocked Myra soothingly. "I'll bet you will vote it the jolliest bunch you ever got mixed up with."

"Do I know any of them?"

"Do you consider yourself acquainted with Gwynne and me?"

"Of course. I meant any of the others."

"Well," Myra spoke dubiously, "if you don't, I think you will get acquainted easily." And with that remark she adroitly turned the conversation and managed to avoid that subject during the rest of their journey.

When the train drew into the dingy little depot the next morning, and the trio gathered up their wraps preparatory to alighting, Tabitha was suddenly heard to ejaculate, "Why, there is Dad! And he's talking with—Miss Pomeroy, as sure as I'm alive! Myra Haskell, is Miss Pomeroy occupying one of those twelve tents?"

Myra glanced hastily through the iron gates, saw that Tabitha was right, and demurely nodded her head.

"Then I can imagine who the others are."

"Bet you can't! At least, not all."

"Bet I can!"

"Who, then, smarty?"

"Grace Tilton, Bessie Jorris, Jessie Wayne, Julia, Chrystie—*is* Chrystie there?"

"Wait and find out," teased Myra.

"Possibly Madeline and Vera,—in fact, all our bunch."

Myra merely laughed, and as they were now spied by Mr. Catt and his companion, there was no further opportunity for discussion; for, after a hasty greeting all around, the man seized all the grips he could manage, and made for the street, saying briskly, "We must hurry. The boat goes at ten, and it is quite a ride to San Pedro."

"I hope," panted Tabitha, trotting along at the rear of the procession, tugging a heavy suit-case, "that you don't have your fun in such a hurry."

"What do you mean?" Myra demanded.

"Well, it's been nothing but hustle since

we started out yesterday afternoon, and I was just wondering if that's the atmosphere of your camp, too."

"Perhaps you will think so," laughed Myra; "for there certainly are few idle minutes with us."

"How long has the bunch been at Avalon? Surely not all summer, or you never could have kept it secret for such a while."

"No," Myra acknowledged, "only—but there, not another question till we reach Catalina. Then you can ask all you want. I've said too much already. First thing I know, you will guess the rest of our surprise." And the girl resolutely closed her lips.

"*Rest* of the surprise," mused Tabitha to herself, when further questions failed to bring forth any more information, and Myra was devoting her attention to quiet Gloriana. "I wonder what it can be. Seems as if there had been about all the surprises one human being could expect in twenty-four hours. Who would ever imagine that Dad would go on a jaunt like this? Isn't it great to be alive in this day and age?"

She fell to dreaming over the many changes

that had come to pass in her life during one short year, and was only roused from her revery by Myra's gripping her shoulder and shouting in her ear, "The boat is whistling its warning now. Not a minute to spare. Run, Kit, run!" And again the little company tore frantically down the street toward the dock where the *Cabrillo* was tugging at her anchor, waiting for the signal to steam away to the Enchanted Isle on her daily voyage.

It was the first time either Tabitha or Gloriana had been on the ocean; and with rapturous hearts they drank in every detail of their brief trip, counted the flying fish that darted out of the water on either side of them, watched the foam dashing high against the bow of the vessel, wondered at the long ribbon of silent water which the ship left in its wake, and were sorry when suddenly Myra called, "There's the island. We are almost there. Now for the fun! There's a bride and groom on board."

"How do you know?"

"Didn't you hear the whistle blow?"

"Sure, but I supposed it was to tell the

islanders that we were coming. Doesn't it always whistle?"

"Yes, but not like it did just now. That's the way they have of letting the folks at Avalon know when there is a recently married couple on board. Then the men are ready and waiting at the dock with a wheelbarrow."

"A wheelbarrow! What on earth do they want of a wheelbarrow?" demanded both girls at once.

"Just for fun. They cart the groom all around the island in it and make a fearful racket. Regular chivari."

"How mean!" cried Gloriana compassionately.

"Oh, it's fun," Myra declared. "They like it. I believe an Avalon citizen who didn't get treated that way would feel insulted, really. Here we are at the landing, and there is the wheelbarrow brigade. It's Murphy, the iceman, who got married this time. See, he's as proud as a peacock at the prospect."

"Yes, but look at the poor little bride," said Gloriana indignantly. "She is scared stiff."

"Bet she's game," replied Myra, after a quick scrutiny of the little, shrinking woman,

clinging to the arm of the big, burly Irishman, as they stepped briskly down the gangplank.

"Do they put *her* in the wheelbarrow, too?" cried Tabitha in amazement.

"Oh, dear, no——"

"They will this one," said the bride with startling suddenness, having chanced to overhear both question and answer. "If they cart my Pat around town in that kind of a rig, they cart me, too." And to the delight and amusement of the crowd gathered to greet the *Cabrillo's* passengers, the little lady tucked herself in the barrow beside her husband and was trundled away by the surprised citizens, who had never wheeled just such a cargo before.

"'Here comes the bride'," a voice began to sing; the crowd took it up, and amid a shower of bright-colored confetti, the plucky bride disappeared down the street still seated beside her smiling Pat.

So intent was Tabitha in watching the queer procession that she had not noticed the quiet approach of a bevy of happy-faced girls; but now, as she turned toward Myra with the remark, "She's clear grit. I'd choose a wife like that if I were a man," she found the laugh-

ing eyes of Grace Tilton staring at her, and before she could find her tongue to voice her surprise, Gwynne's regal head bobbed through the crowd toward her. Jessie and Julia, Vera and Kate, all her particular friends at Ivy Hall, seemed to spring up around her, and although half expecting to find them there, she stood transfixed with amazement, silently regarding them one by one, while they in silence stared back at her. Then the circle parted, and among the familiar faces of her schoolmates appeared another, which dimpled and smiled and nodded engagingly, and Tabitha awoke with a start.

"Carrie Carson!" she cried, and ran straight into the outstretched arms of the golden-haired girl.

"Kitty, my puss!" whispered Carrie, cuddling the black head dropped on her shoulder; and the other girls thoughtfully turned away to watch the sea-gulls careening about the mastheads of the big *Cabrillo*.

But after a moment, that sweet, familiar voice spoke again, and turning back, the Ivy Hall girls saw Carrie stretching out her hands to timid Gloriana, as she said, "So this is my

other sister, my Gloriana! It seems as if I had always known you. We are going to have great times at Ivy Hall this year. Come on, girls, the glass bottom boat is to take us to the Marine Gardens right after dinner, and we'll have to hurry, or be late."

Myra turned to Tabitha with a comical grimace, and said, "What did I tell you? Hurry's the word."

Then a babel of voices broke loose, all laughing and talking at once, and in triumph Tabitha and Gloriana were escorted to Ivy Hall Camp.

CHAPTER XV

MYRA'S CLIMAX

"WELL, vacation is over, and we had just begun having a good time," sighed Tabitha mournfully, drawing back the curtains and peering out of the window that September morning into the gray fog of early dawn. "It doesn't seem possible that we are back in Los Angeles again. I 'most wish we had stayed at Catalina for this last day."

The Catalina campers, after a delightful two weeks' outing on the Island, had returned to mainland the day before; but as Ivy Hall had not yet opened its doors to its pupils, and most of the girls lived in neighboring towns, Myra Haskell had invited them to spend the night with her at her aunt's house. The aunt, Mrs. Cummings, was herself away on a brief vacation, but had given her harum-scarum niece permission to take possession of her

pretty bungalow for the two nights the party would be in Los Angeles before school commenced. So, as the gray day dawned, it found a dozen mummy-like figures stretched about the floor of the great living-room, wrapped in blankets and quilts, and snoring blissfully.

This was the audience which Tabitha addressed, but she did not realize that she had spoken her thoughts aloud, and was startled when Myra, without opening her eyes, grunted, "Huh! You'll sing another tune before night. This is to be *the* gala day of your life. You will never forget it. When Dad starts out to do a thing, he never stops half way. The only trouble is to get him started."

"I didn't mean to grumble, truly," cried Tabitha, dismayed at having had her ungracious complaint overheard by her young hostess. "It is just grand of your family to invite all of us out to your ranch for the day, but I believe it's going to rain. It certainly looks like it. You could cut the fog with a knife."

"Whist! my young friend," murmured Gwynne, wakened from her slumbers by the sound of voices in the room. "Don't be so

pessimistic. Don't you know it never rains in California? At least not in the summer time." For from the opposite corner of the room someone had sleepily murmured, "What about the ostriches?" and the whole company laughed reminiscently, recalling that Thanksgiving night when the storm had frightened the ostriches at the Park until they broke loose and created a panic among the returning theatre-goers.

"Who said rain?" demanded Grace, lifting a tousled head from the pillow to survey the hilarious group scattered about the floor of the spacious room.

"Go back to sleep,—you dreamed it!" teased Bessie, who had begun to slip on her clothes. "'Twas snow we were talking about. Feels like it, anyway."

"It *is* pretty chilly," admitted Tabitha, shivering under the thin folds of her borrowed dressing-gown, as she turned away from the window and prepared to follow Bessie's example. "Wake up, thou sluggards, 'tis time you were dressed. Remember we have a long and arduous day ahead of us."

"Kitty must be tired," said Julia in mock

sympathy, crawling out of her warm nest and jerking the blanket off her nearest neighbor with ruthless hand. "Is that it, Kitty? First you want it to rain, and then when you can't make it do that, you begin to moan about the length of the day before us."

"All wrong," Vera spoke up suddenly. "She is merely thinking of that dear, cross-eyed boatman at Avalon. You know he promised to give us a free ride to the Marine Gardens this morning, and here we all came away and dragged Tabitha with us. Shame on us! What could we be thinking about!"

Tabitha wisely joined in the laugh which followed this sally, and sent a pillow flying after her tormentor, who had made a wild dash for the hall. "No, sir, I'm not bemoaning my fate," she vigorously denied, with her mouth full of pins. "I know we shall have a splendid time at the ranch. Only it seems as if vacation had only just begun, instead of being nearly ended; and the day looks so cloudy and gray that it doesn't seem like a fitting climax for our lovely two weeks at Catalina."

"It is too bad that you got cheated out of

all the fun this summer," Myra sympathized heartily. "But just you wait until the day is done before you say it is not a fitting climax—Gracious Cæsar! Here's one of the autos already! Surely they can't be coming so soon! What time is it, anyway?"

"Half-past six," Gloriana answered, glancing at an open watch that lay on the library table.

"Half-past nothing!" cried Vera, tumbling hastily into the room with her eyes as big as saucers. "It is almost eight o'clock!"

"You are joking!" cried the rest of the group in wild alarm.

"Am not! True as you're alive, the kitchen clock says a quarter of eight o'clock."

"Oho!" murmured Myra guilty. "I—I—really, I forgot——"

"Forgot what?" they demanded, as she doubled up and shrieked with laughter.

"I—I must have set all the watches in the crowd behind time," she managed to explain at length.

"When?"

"Last night."

"What for?"

"Just a joke."

"A joke? I can't see any joke about that!" spluttered Jessie indignantly. "Did you think we wanted to go for a forty-mile auto ride on empty stomachs? I'm as hungry as a bear this minute."

"I am awfully sorry," cried Myra penitently, sobering at the realization of just what would be the outcome of her joke. "I meant to set them two hours ahead, so you would all get up at daybreak and be ready long before the autos came."

"Just like you!" they exclaimed, half amused, half provoked. "What are you going to do about it now?"

"What can we do? The autos are here already with the rest of the people. There are the Carsons and here comes Miss Pomeroy."

"And there is Tabitha's father in his new machine."

"Yes, and mine," said Myra. "My! won't he be mad to think we aren't even dressed? If there is one thing above another that he abominates, it is having to wait for a woman to get ready to go somewhere. Well, I suppose I'll have to break the news to him. Then

after you have all gone home again, won't I get the dickens?"

"Hold on!" cried Tabitha, as Myra started for the door. "There is no need of that, is there? I've got a brilliant inspiration. Didn't you say when you investigated the larder last night that your aunt must have baked just a-purpose for our visit?"

"Yes, words to that effect. There is a whole crock full of doughnuts and another of cookies. She must have had baking day just before she decided to take her little trip. But why?"

"We'll just fill our pockets——"

"Haven't any!"

"Well, our hands, then, and eat our breakfast on the sly."

"On the *fly* you mean," said Gwynne, sarcastically.

"To be exact, yes. Or perhaps it would be better to pretend that we just found the supplies as we were about to leave the house. That will be the truth, so far as the most of us are concerned, won't it?"

"But cookies and doughnuts are pretty

slim fare for hungry bodies," grumbled Vera, tugging at an unruly collar.

"Better than nothing," said Bessie cheerfully. "Dinner will taste all the better."

"But we aren't ready," objected Julia, slipping the last hairpin in the heavy coil at the back of her head. "My shoes aren't buttoned yet, and I can't scare up a hook in the whole outfit."

"Bring 'em in your hand, then," suggested Gwynne. "I'm ready now, and I elect myself commissary general to distribute the rations as you pass out. Who'll be first in line? Gather up your bedding, Jessie, and stack it in the corner, else Myra's aunt will think tramps camped here instead of civilized human beings. Now, are you all clothed and in your right minds? Then, Grace, poke your head out of the window and announce to the audience that we will be out in a minute. Where are your hats and coats? Yes, Kate, there'll be time for you to wash your face if you haven't been able to do so before. Look pleasant, please! No one must suspect that we've had no breakfast; but in my mind's eye, I can see this bunch stowing away their dinner

three or four hours from now. Hope they serve it as soon as we get there Do you suppose there will be enough to go around? How far did you say it was, Myra? Forty miles?"

Laughing and joking, the dozen hungry, breakfastless girls hurried into their coats and veils, seized their pitifully small allotment of doughnuts and cookies, and boisterously climbed aboard the autos waiting for them.

"Only ten minutes late by actual count," Mr. Haskell complimented them, as the merry crowd poured out of the door.

"Well, well, that's doing fine! How did it happen?"

"It's all Myra's fault," began Vera plaintively, but Myra, fearful that she was about to be betrayed, hastily asked, "Where is the dinner, Dad? Didn't mother tell you to bring——"

"Some stuffed squabs, fruit and cake? Yes, she did; and it's packed in that trunk hitched onto the step there. You'll have to sit on it, I guess. There doesn't seem to be quite room enough to accommodate all the crowd."

This arrangement just suited Myra, who

loved to romp like her brothers; so she gleefully perched on top of the long, flat chest strapped on one side of the auto, and the procession slowly set out on its long journey.

"My! but it's a beautiful day," sighed Tabitha at length, her eyes wandering from the fog-wet landscape below to the sky above, where the blue was already chasing away the gray, as the sun struggled up behind the eastern hills.

"Didn't I tell you so?" crowed Gwynne, regretfully studying the last bite of a doughnut before popping it into her mouth. "It doesn't rain in California. Is this the river we cross eighteen times, Myra, in order to reach your ranch?"

"Only eight," mumbled Myra, with her mouth full of cookie crumbs. "This is it. Allow me to introduce you to the great——"

"Great!" echoed Tabitha, looking down at the shallow, sluggish stream with critical eyes. "Is it *really* a river? Looks to me like the little puddles we used to sail boats in after a heavy rain-storm back home when I was a little tot."

"It isn't very awe-inspiring now, is it?

But you should see it in the spring after the rains. It certainly can play havoc then. Changes its channel every two or three years, and causes all sorts of damage. What is the matter ahead there?" Their auto had slowed down suddenly, and now came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the road. "What has happened, Dad?"

"Carson's auto is stuck in the mud."

"Mud?"

"Well, the river-bed, if that suits you any better. I'll get out and see if I can help them——"

"No need; they've started up again," said Tabitha, waving her hand at Carrie and wishing that she had been fortunate enough to get a seat in Mr. Carson's machine.

The delayed procession started onward again, and without further difficulty crossed the muddy river-bed and sped swiftly away down the smooth road on the other side. But that same river had to be reckoned with seven more times, and each time at least one of the cars sank in the treacherous mud and had to be dug out.

"Well, thank fortune, this is the last time

we cross!" breathed Myra, as they approached the winding river for the eighth time. "Ours is the only auto that hasn't stuck fast so far. Let her out, Dad, and we'll be on the other bank in a jiffy. I never knew the river to be so high at this season of the year."

"Knock on wood, Myra, knock on wood!" cried Gwynne in mock alarm. "Too late, we've stuck fast! Why on earth couldn't you wait until we had safely reached the other side before you commenced bragging?"

"Huh! You superstitious duck, did you think we could escape? Oh, pshaw, we're out! Not even the fun of having to be helped across like the others were! Well, never mind, Mr. Catt's machine is sure to stick again. It has every time so far. There, didn't I tell you? Hurrah! Watch your father puff, Kitty. Ain't he a sight? Get out your shovel, Mr. Catt!"

Myra was excitedly dancing on the lid of the luncheon-filled chest, as she hung precariously over the back of the tonneau, and bawled her remarks at the unfortunate occupants of the auto behind them, which seemed to sink

deeper and deeper in the mire with every effort to dig her out.

"Fasten this rope to your car and we'll try dragging you out," finally suggested the ponderous Mr. Haskell, clambering heavily down from his seat at the wheel and going to the aid of his unlucky neighbor, who was not yet much skilled in the art of running an automobile. So they tied the two cars together with a heavy rope, and tried to drag the captive machine loose, but without success.

"Let me drive," suggested Myra, after they had tugged in vain for several minutes, "and you get out and pull on the rope, too."

"What good will that do?" growled her father crossly. "If sixty horse power won't budge the thing, do you suppose man's puny strength will?"

Nevertheless, he crawled out of his seat once more, and seized the great rope dangling between the two cars. Mr. Catt, resigning his wheel to the driver of the next machine in line, followed Mr. Haskell's example, and with three or four of the other men of the party, they added their strength to that of the machine, and pulled with all their might.

Myra, at the wheel, was in her element, and putting on full power, she gave the lever a vicious jerk. The car leaped forward like a thing alive, and bounded up the opposite bank at break-neck speed.

"Ah!" she cried in triumph, "I knew I could get her started. I'm a bird!"

"Oh, Daddy," shrieked Tabitha's voice from the rear seat. "Let go, oh, let go! Mr. Haskell, you'll be killed!"

"Myra, you chump!" hissed Gwynne in her ear. "Shut that thing off! The rope's bu'sted and you are dragging our precious men folks up hill."

Myra glanced hastily behind her, reversed the wheel, and as the car came to a standstill, she sprawled across the seat, doubled up with merriment, half hysterical. "Oh, didn't they look funny hanging onto that rope? What fools some mortals be! Why didn't they let go? Bet Dad's got his nose skinned good, for when I looked back, he was plowing up the road on his head. Is he hurt? I don't dast to ask! Mr. Catt, your clothes are pretty dusty."

"Dusty I'll admit, but not very pretty," he

smiled grimly, as he wiped the perspiration from his grimy face. "However, you got the car out of the rut, so perhaps we can proceed on our way now."

"Then it might be wise if I resigned my seat to the chauffeur before I am requested," chuckled Myra, still laughing immoderately at thought of her father's undignified attitude as he was dragged through the dust, clinging desperately to the frayed end of the broken rope. So she scrambled nimbly to her place on the running board, and there Mr. Haskell found her sitting prim and decorous when he had finally recovered his breath and made himself sufficiently presentable to face the rest of the party.

"Your nose is a little—soiled," she told him, as he climbed stiffly into his seat, "and somewhat scrubbed, I'm afraid."

Her voice shook a little in spite of her efforts to control her mirth, and he scowled darkly at his irrepressible daughter, though he only said, "Are you all ready?"

So again the procession of autos took up their journey, and with no further accident finally reached the great walnut ranch where

the Haskell family lived during the summer. The rosy, smiling mother greeted them from the veranda as the cars rolled up the smooth driveway and unloaded at the door. "You are late," she said cheerily. "Did you have any mishaps? I knew you would be hungry after your long ride, so we are serving dinner early. Dave, did you get the squabs all right?"

"Yes, he did," Myra answered. "I sat on them all the way out here. Dad, bring on the 'eats'. Why, what is the matter?"

Mr. Haskell stood in the driveway frowning heavily at the car, much as he might have done at a naughty little boy. At Myra's boisterous call, he raised his eyes and inquired, "Where *are* the 'eats'?"

"In the chest, of course. What do you—" Her voice died away in a husky, bewildered squeak. The rest of the party came closer, followed the direction of her glance, and gasped. The hamper full of stuffed squabs was gone!

"Well, of all things!" cried Gwynne, when the silence was becoming oppressive. "How could it have happened?"

"With Myra sitting on it!" chorused the girls.

"Didn't you miss it?"

"N-o."

"Ha, ha, that's one on you, Miss Haskell," laughed Mr. Carson. "*Sitting* on the lunch box and never missed it when it tumbled overboard. How did *you* manage to stick on?"

"How did the other machines manage to come along behind us and never find it?" retorted Myra, nettled at the hilarity of her companions. "*That* is the question!"

"We must have lost it in the river," suggested Tabitha.

"Of course! When we were trying to pull out the other machine and I shaved Dad's nose. Didn't I do a good job, Mumsie? Must we go hungry now because I lost all your little stuffed scrubs,—I mean squabs?" Anxiously she turned toward her mother and scanned that sober face, for her eighteen hour fast had left her half famished, and there were at least eleven other girls in the same boat, all because of her stupid attempt at joking.

"We-ll, I have cooked a kettle of new potatoes and another of green corn,—plenty of

both. But it looks as if you must go without meat."

"Oh, we can get along nicely, I know. Vegetables are better than meat anyway, you know. Come on, let's eat!" At that moment she felt hungry enough to swallow the dishes themselves, and anything sounded appetizing to her. As the rest of the party were equally as hungry, they were not slow to respond to her invitation, and in a very short time the tables were stripped; but the ravenous appetites were appeased, and the little company scattered in groups about the ranch to enjoy the few brief hours of their stay.

The return trip was as tame as the first part of the journey had been exciting, for not a single car stuck once, and just as the city clocks were striking nine, the tired, sunburned, but blissfully happy girls again found themselves entering Mrs. Cummings' deserted house, where they were to spend this last night before Ivy Hall opened its doors to receive them.

"Oh, Kit, your father gave me a letter for you, hours ago," suddenly exclaimed Myra in dismay, as they were unrolling their

blankets ready for bed, and she dragged forth a crumpled envelope from her blouse and presented it to her surprised companion. "I'm so sorry I forgot it. Really, it's inexcusable in me."

"It's of little consequence," Tabitha assured her, scanning the unfamiliar handwriting with puzzled eyes. "I don't know anyone in Boston. Oh, it's from Billiard and Toady, I reckon. They live at Jamaica Plains, and—why, there's money in it! One hundred dollars. What in the world— Will you listen to this, girls? You know I told you about their getting part of the reward for helping capture the bank robbers in Silver Bow? Well, they are sending it back and want to know if it's enough to give Mercedes another year at Ivy Hall."

A deep hush fell upon the group of tired, sleepy girls preparing for the night. Each maid recalled with a twinge of conscience the picture of quiet, sober-faced Mercedes McKittrick, as she had said good-bye to them that last day of school. "I can never forget any of you," she had said shyly, "and I'm glad of that, for it's nice to remember pleas-

ant times when you can't have any more." They had not understood then, but now they knew it was her way of renouncing the happy school days which she must give up because of her father's illness; and they were ashamed of their indifference.

"I'll add fifty dollars of the check Uncle Jerry gave me," whispered Gloriana, breaking the painful silence at last.

"And there's my birthday money in the bank," said Tabitha. "That's another fifty."

"Oh, if only I hadn't spent my allowance for clothes that I didn't need!" groaned Myra. "But I still have nine dollars and ninety-nine cents left. Can anyone make it an even ten? Ivy Hall will be open to us tomorrow, and school begins Monday. I can get along nicely on my nerve until my next allowance comes in. Here, let's pass the hat."

"Me, first!" cried Bessie enthusiastically, reaching for her purse. "I'll give ten dollars."

"My money is *all* gone," mourned Grace, "but I'll *promise* ten dollars if you will take pledges."

In utter amazement Tabitha sat curled up on her pile of blankets, watching the shower of gold and silver which poured into her lap. "Oh, girls," she gasped, when she could find her tongue. "How can I ever thank you? Mercy will be transported with joy. Here's more than enough to pay all her expenses, and Carrie will want a share in it, too. Aren't friends splendid!" Her voice was husky and tremulous, and two bright drops glistened in her black eyes. What a beautiful world this is to live in! Somehow, the spontaneous gift to little Mercedes seemed a gift to her also, and she thoroughly appreciated the loving act of her classmates. What a beautiful climax to her summer vacation!

Jessie sniffed audibly, and Vera surreptitiously wiped a big tear off the end of her nose. Myra, who hated scenes, brought the group back to the earth with a thump, saying briskly, "Come, let's to bed! I'm half dead already, and my face is smarting like sin. I don't like your cold cream, Kitty."

"Cold cream?" repeated Tabitha in surprise.

"Yes, I helped myself to the contents of the

jar I found in your suitcase. No one else had any, and my face was burned to a frazzle."

"Did you put that stuff on your face?" screamed Tabitha, holding up a tiny white jar of creamy paste.

"Sure. Why?"

"Because it's corn salve. No wonder it smarts. Go wash——"

But Myra waited to hear no more. There was a wild scamper of bare feet on the hall floor, the bath-room door banged noisily, water splashed vigorously, and just as the girls were drifting off to sleep, they heard Myra, snuggling down in her blankets, murmur sadly, "It's lucky the Hall opens to-morrow. Otherwise these girls would soon be the death of me."

THE END